

The Philippines Marriage Guide



**DOWN
UNDER VISA**

by Perry Gamsby

Down Under Visa's Guide To Getting Married In The Philippines

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Congratulations!

Congratulations to both of you and your families. You are about to begin a journey through Life together that, hopefully, will be long, prosperous and validate the biggest decision either of you have ever made in your lives.

Before you pop the champagne and dance the Bridal Waltz, there are a few, er, formalities to take care of. More than a few in fact. Nothing in the Philippines is ever as easy as you might at first expect, but then again there are many things that are so much simpler and easier to achieve than back in Australia. Getting married, sorry to say, isn't one of them.

This book will list the steps you must take, step by step, to get your bride to the altar. While there are lots of steps, myriad pieces of paper to collect, copy and notarize and, of course, fees to be paid, it is not an insurmountable task. It can be done and in fact it is done all the time by couples just like you. The secret is, as with anything related to anything remotely legal, official or necessary, more a question of good planning and preparation than good luck.

Fortunately everything you need to know and do to get married is included in this book. It draws on the personal experience of the author, but also the experiences of dozens of blokes who have trod the path before you. I have researched, collated, analysed and addressed information from all the official sources such as the Australian Embassy in Manila, the Philippines Consulate in Sydney, the National Statistics Office in the Philippines and literally dozens of first hand anecdotes and reports from members of my Philippine Dreams Yahoo Group.

I was married in Daanbantayan, Cebu, in 2002 and while much is still as it was back then, there are some new procedures and requirements that must be met to marry in the Philippines today. I have made very, very sure that my information is accurate and current at time of writing because, professionalism aside, this is not something you want to get wrong. It is too important, too charged with emotion and too costly to fix if you run out of time or find the document you need is unavailable for whatever reason.

I have organised the information in this book so that it offers a timeline of things you must do, set out in easy to read and understand language. Start at the beginning, do each step as required and tick off the boxes one by one. Of course, the 'Filipino Factor' will crop up from time to time to make things a

little more interesting. My best advice is to keep smiling, at least on the outside. Trust me, losing your temper or expressing your vexation (fancy word for being pissed off) will achieve little in the Pinas. Their culture turns on the one making the fuss, no matter how justified that fuss may be. They prefer you give everyone an honourable 'out', even those not responsible for the stuff-up will be embarrassed by your pointing out the culprit's inefficiencies to the world at large and side with them. So stay cool, calm, collected and in control; or as in control as you can manage.

There are various explanations for the 'Filipino Factor'. Some of them are cultural and once you understand the motivations behind the machinations, it gets easier to stay calm for longer. Even knowing why something is pretty messed up doesn't guarantee you won't blow your stack now and then. Try not to, though as it doesn't help one little bit. First of all you need to understand that everyone involved in the situation and around whoever is stuffing up feeling good about themselves, is more important than getting the job done well, on time, efficiently or even at all. It has a lot to do with the Filipino psyche and concept of 'pakikisama'; group harmony. When you think about it, it makes sense. In a society where connections and social position are so important, you don't want to make a mistake and upset someone who can make your life miserable. There is a hierarchy in place and while it might be unknown or unseen to us foreigners, it is very much there for the Filipinos.

As an example, complaining at SM and asking to see the manager may well get the clerk fired. Not because it is her fault but because you have brought embarrassment on the manager's head by pointing out through your genuine complaint how they are incompetent and so on. The only recourse the manager has to regain 'hiya', or face, is to take action against whoever is beneath them on the pecking order. This is why many seem reluctant to offer the kind of customer service we are used to and why they say 'Out of Stock' when they don't know the answer or fear making any inquiries. It would put whoever is in charge of inventory in a bad light and they are always more senior to the clerks.

This mentality permeates throughout the society, be it government or private enterprise. You will experience it when you order off the menu and an hour later, still no item. Finally you will find they don't have it and are too embarrassed to say so as it would hurt your feelings, or make them look silly. I know, they look sillier, to us, when the truth is finally out but if you were a Filipino you wouldn't put them in that position to begin with. Even if it is the 'house special', you ask 'Mayroon?', 'do you have?' and not 'gusta ka', 'I would like'. By asking if they have they can say no and everyone is happy. By you saying that is what you want you put them on the spot to provide it. I know, I know, the menu says they have it but that is just a guide to what they think you might like to order. It's complicated and if you can't grasp this then your marriage will be a ton of fun, believe me.

What makes sense to us foreigners is bizarre to them and vice versa. Their way works for them in their society and, despite the façade of western culture (signs in English, English movies and TV shows, use of English slang terms etc), this is very much an Asian society, albeit one influenced by the Spanish and the Americans. When in Rome, remember? A big mistake many make is to think that because they do things in a way that often beggars belief to us they are stupid or inferior. If you truly believe that about their society and culture... why are you marrying into it? Some of the things you will witness and experience do seem stupid to us, but they have their reasons and in their culture they make perfect sense. Never forget that and never, ever call a Filipino 'stupid'. The word has far more negative connotation to a Filipino than it does to us, but that is a book on its own entirely, so enough about that for now.

Wedding Customs

As you might expect in a country with such diversity of languages (over 100 languages and dialects are spoken across the 7,000 islands of the archipelago), wedding customs do have regional specialities. It is not the

scope of this book to explore all of them, or even most of them but I will try and give you an idea of how they differ from what you may have previously experienced in Australia.

My best advice, when you are planning the wedding itself, is to talk to your fiancée and get some idea of what she thinks should happen at the wedding ceremony and reception. Many Filipinas have little grasp of western wedding rituals and traditions, at least in any detail. If I had taken my own advice I might have had a very different experience and most likely a lot less angst trying to pull it all together.

In Cebu, at least, the wedding mass or ceremony is usually held in the morning. One sister in law had a 7am Mass, followed by full lechon baboy wedding feast at 8am. There's nothing like cold, greasy pork first thing in the morning for breakfast. I don't know why they prefer to let the meat cool off, but worst of all is the total ignorance of the existence of apple sauce. But I digress.

The reason for the morning or early afternoon wedding is so that all the guests can filter in during the day and help themselves to the food, eat it then leave; carrying a doggie bag, of course. While this all day and often into the evening affair is very convenient for everyone else, it must be taxing on the newly weds. They have to remain on duty and tend to their guests until after dark when they can do what newly weds do. Given few will have a honeymoon of any kind, the next day is often straight back to work.

Sometimes there will be a fiesta disco held the night before the wedding, the last chance for the still single couple to kick up their heels. I pointed out to my wife the other day when we were discussing our wedding that our timeline didn't allow for this, or the before noon wedding ceremony. She had said nothing about how it is done in Calape and to be honest, I hadn't thought to ask her. We were married around 5pm, after driving up from Cebu City and faffing about for an hour or two while she prepared herself. After the ceremony we hit the resort for the reception just as night fell. As it was a fair

way off the main road I had the resort jeepney ferry the guests in (and out so they could catch a jeepney home).

Our guests for the most part hadn't seen the amount and variety of food we enjoyed in their lives, except maybe in a movie. The poorest relations were hanging back, too shy to come in to the resort dining hall area. I had to greet and usher them in personally, sit them down and exhort them to help themselves to the buffet.

I wrote a chapter about the whole experience in my book, 'Philippine Dreams', titled 'Wed, Fed And Off To Bed In Forty Minutes'. I was stunned to see everyone leaving almost as soon as they had finished eating the main meal. We had to bring the cake cutting forward to make sure we got rid of the thing and weren't left with half of it. Everyone had a doggie bag full of pancit noodles, chicken, pork lechon and of course, lots of rice, spaghetti and all the usual dishes offered at these occasions. An hour or so after we kicked off, there were just the immediate family and my few western friends, mostly shanghaied from the dive resort on Malapascua Island and met just a few days before. Quality rather than quantity.

Fortunately, the western guests knew what to do and my sister helped get everyone fed and watered, then the remainder lined up for the bridal waltz, the tossing of the bouquet and the toasts and speeches, so traditions were observed. My wife and her family had no experience of much of this, much to my surprise. This is something you need to take into account. It may have changed completely in the intervening years but do not be surprised if that sweet, young thing from 'da probince' has little or no idea of what we consider 'normal' at a wedding. We do come from different cultures and an event like this will highlight this. It is up to you, as her husband to be and thus a leader of the family, to guide her. If you want a western style wedding, of course.

There is every chance your bride will be from the city, have been to other weddings and shares many of the same customs. It might be her, wherever she comes from, who finds it difficult to understand how come you know

nothing about her customs; such as the 'pamamanhikan' that follows the 'kasunduan', which comes after the 'paniligaw'. To put it in the right order; first there is the paniligaw, or courtship. Then there is the kasunduan, the engagement and finally, the pamamanhikan, or what I call, 'The Viewing'. Basically the groom and his family go to the home of the bride's family and they sit across from one another, engage in small talk and then make a formal acceptance of the marriage proposal. It is not just the couple that are getting married here, but a joining of two families. Everyone gets a chance to see the soon to be new relatives and, no doubt, form their own opinions of how successful the match will be. Lots of grist for the chismis mill! (Gossip, in other words)

The wedding arrangements will be discussed. It is traditional in the Philippines for the groom to 'shoulder all expenses'. These days that is often not the case and the expenses will be shared if both families are of equal financial capability. If the groom is a kano, then of course you pay for the lot. It is important to set a budget and let your fiancée know what that is and that that is all there is. Some fiancée's are excellent money managers and will save money from the budget; others will go way over it and set a precedent for your married life to come. When setting the budget, do try to be as generous as you can; it is her big day after all.

My wedding cost, airfare aside, around \$1,000. That was in 2002, today I would expect to double that but it is still a lot cheaper than paying for everything we had in Australia. That \$1,000 covered her dress, formal wear hire for the bridal party, flowers, the transportation, reception hire and catering for over 100 people, the ceremony, everything. Great value and one of the biggest and best weddings ever seen in Calape. If you hold it in the city then it will cost more and of course, you can spend as much on a wedding in the Philippines as you can anywhere else in the world. Up to you.

Some customs that are common throughout the islands include the wearing of a white dress by the bride. This is the American influence at work. The groom wears a barong tagalog shirt, loose over a white t-shirt and black trousers.

The expensive barong shirts are made from pineapple fibre, but you can buy a synthetic one if you figure you'll only wear it the once.

There will also be sponsors, acting as a kind of godparent. We had the local chief of police, the high school principal and the barangay captain sponsor us; so I guess we are pretty well connected in the community. The usual arrangement is that there are six Ninong (godfathers) and six Ninang (godmothers). Then there is the bridal party of bridesmaids and groomsmen. But wait, there's more. There can also be three pairs of wedding attendants responsible for lighting the candles, placing the veil and looping the cord around the couple. On top of those, you might also have a ring bearer, an arrhae bearer and a Bible bearer.

The arrhae comprises of 13 coins, either silver or gold or a mix of the two. It is a monetary gift to the bride from the groom, a pledge he has the ability to support her and their children. My wife still has our arrhae; thirteen mint \$2 coins. It caused quite a stir when I produced it at the wedding. Everyone muttered approving mutterings, probably amazed the kano had done his homework.

There is also the veil which is pinned to the couple to signify they are now joined as one. It goes over the bride's head and across the groom's shoulders and usually requires a lot of faffing about by whoever is appointed this honour. There is also a cord, draped over the couple in a figure 8 to symbolize the eternity of the marriage and the fidelity of the couple. This is called a 'yugal' in Tagalog.

If the budget permits, it is customary to release a pair of white doves at the reception, symbolizing marital harmony and peace. I'm sure if it is something your bride must have she'll know who to call to find the dove wrangler in the neighbourhood.

There are a number of superstitions surrounding weddings, as one might expect. Siblings are not supposed to marry within the same calendar year. My

two sisters-in-law married in the same year and sadly one died the following year after childbirth. While I don't think there is any connection whatsoever, it wasn't seen the same way within the family and was bandied about as a possible reason for her death. Unbeknown to us, if one of them had passed through the back door of the church instead of the front, it would have de-hexed the pair of them.

The bride and groom should not travel before the wedding, to prevent accidents. Given I had to fly in from Sydney to Manila, then travel down to Cebu with my fiancée and then we had to travel to her province... we were pushing the envelope on this one. Bad luck can be had if the bride wears pearls, which represent tears. A procession of bolo wielding, gong sounding guys is supposed to follow the couple from the ceremony to the reception to ward off evil spirits. We relied on the exhaust of the V-Hire we used. Many weddings these days break plates to scare the onngu's away. I'd check with the reception venue first or you might find them added to the bill if anyone gets carried away.

You can't wear black to the wedding (groom's trousers an exception) and no sharp items as gifts; something seen in Western weddings also and not surprising as it was something the Spanish introduced. There are more to be aware of, such as the bride walking ahead of the groom or step on his foot so he doesn't come to dominate her. Typhoons on the day of the wedding are also a bad omen, as is a candle blowing out which will signify the death of the groom or bride. It depends on whose side the candle snuffs itself as to who is the unlucky one. Don't drop the ring, veil or arrhae as this will cause marital misery.

They do throw rice at the married couple, uncooked of course. In the pre-Spanish days the couple swore their betrothal over a pot of uncooked rice, so this might stem back to those days. The groom should arrive first and if a single woman walks behind the married couple then she's certain to get married soon, herself.

The more upscale the bride's family, the more likely you are to have a huge wedding with all the trimmings and customs. Even poor parents and families will expect a certain standard and so they should. Weddings are one of the three big social events of any society; the others being births and deaths. If you are serious about marrying a Filipina, then respect and embrace their culture and their customs on her big day. You only do it the once, usually, so make it worth remembering.

Marry Here, or There?

There are many very valid reasons why you should marry your Filipina in the Philippines. Apart from the fact it is her 'Big Day' and the family will want to share the occasion, there is the cost. In Australia a wedding can easily cost several thousand dollars for anything remotely resembling a traditional, 'white wedding'. In the Philippines, the 'thousands' will be in pesos.

If she has been married before she might not put so much store in a proper wedding and be amenable to just 'getting it done'. On the other hand, every Filipina is a romantic at heart and the wedding is a huge part of her dreams and aspirations. A registry office ceremony and a quick bit to eat for the newly weds and an intimate group of friends will set you back a few hundred bucks... but is that the wedding she wants? Is that the memory she will cherish? I doubt it.

If she is an orphan with no family and few close friends and is desperate to leave the country then go for it. As the odds of finding a Filipina who ticks all those boxes are pretty slim, don't be in a hurry to get her to Australia and in front of a celebrant. In fact, don't be in a hurry, period. Marry in haste, repent at leisure. I read some great advice in an article on the Down Under Visa website about not marrying at all if this trip is the first time you have met.

Many blokes fall in love via the internet and have spent hours exchanging emails, talking via Skype and so on. They really think the person they know that way is the same one who they will spend the rest of their lives with. Be honest, are you exactly who you portray yourself as when you are chatting online?

Even if you have met before several times, you need three to four weeks to organise the wedding and make sure you have sufficient time to jump through all the hoops. Don't rush it. I did mine in two weeks and I will never forget having to say goodbye to my wife of four days and return to Australia. We then tried to get the visa process going and back then it was a nightmare. My wife had to call the embassy between 3pm and 5pm, no other time was allowed. Every time she or I would call the line was always busy. Never once in over one hundred attempts did either of us get through. Forget ringing earlier, the phone didn't 'switch on' until 3pm. After she spent an afternoon in the rain, standing on the rock that gave the only cell phone coverage in the barangay (it's much improved now, by the way), I decided enough was enough. Sold my house, my Land Rover and my sailboat and went and lived in the Philippines for three and a half years.

That time together, in her country, was a very positive thing. We were able to adjust to each other as a married couple on her ground, in a culture she understood. Remember, you hold so much of the 'power' in the relationship. You have the money. When she comes to Australia, it is all very, very new and different and she is totally dependent upon you. Imagine how insecure you might feel in that situation.

Having the wedding in the Philippines achieves a great deal. It sets the tone of the marriage by showing her you are willing to accommodate her and her family, within reasonable limits, of course. It shows you respect her and her culture and that you care that she has her big day. If you are time poor, then you can always organise a fiancée visa through Jeff and his team at Down Under Visa. Yes, you can do the paperwork yourself but you only get one

crack at it. Get it right and all is well. Get it wrong over some misinterpretation or silly little detail and you will make it all the harder when you reapply.

If you can't get enough vacation time, why not? Leave without pay is always an option, or wait and rack up more leave time and more savings. You will be together forever, hopefully, so a few more weeks or months shouldn't be a major issue. If you follow the guidelines in this book, you should be able to do it in two weeks, but this is 'da Pilipeens!' You can always have your fiancée organise her paperwork before you come and you can order your CENOMAR online these days, even the CNI from the embassy can be had in advance. If time is tight, you land on Day 1 of your vacation. Attend the registry on Day 2 and get lucky with the pre-marriage seminar', organise the wedding and then, on Day 11 (ten days after issue of the license) you get married. You then honeymoon on Days 12 and 13 and head back to the airport on Day 14, back at the grindstone the next day. Plan it right and you can use weekends either end to give you more days.

So yes, it can be done; I've done it, but really, do you want to rush this? Do you want to risk something going pear shaped? The timeline above works if you are getting married in Manila or Cebu, even Davao. The further away from the big cities and international airports you have to go, the more time it will take. Even a four hour bus trip to the province can kill a day, or take away a lot of the time you have to do the running around. In Daanbantayan, the registry official we needed to issue our license also ran a stall at the market next to the Municipality (as did the post master and the jailer!). When we arrived, she had ducked away a little early for lunch to handle the midday rush. We waited until 2pm, but fortunately she also did the seminar and had us in and out in half an hour. You just never know how the thing will play out until you get there.

Finally, I've said this before several times, but I will say it again. This is her big day. It really, really means a lot to her and her family. You are going to take their precious daughter away to a foreign country, one they probably have little or no real idea of what it is like. My own, sweet mother in law, Mama

Alice, was genuinely concerned I might take their daughter to Australia and they'd never see her ever again, or hear from her. She even worried I might be the wife-basher type; she hadn't known me for more than a few days, collectively, even though I had stayed at her home twice before. Of course now she loves me as I love her and I am blessed to have such a wonderful family in the Philippines. Last April I went there on business without my wife and of course, I stayed with the inlaws. I was treated like their own son, even though we hardly speak each other's language. Bottom line, last word of advice... don't rush, don't blow it and do it for your beloved Filipina.

Some Sobering Thoughts On Marrying Your Filipina

None of what is written below probably refers to you or your relationship with your Filipina, however, do give it some serious thought as it is drawn from years of observations and conversations with Fil-Aus couples. It is not included to put you off marrying your lady, but rather to help you to get your own thoughts into some semblance of order at a time that is highly charged with emotion. Just read it and then have a think about the views expressed, but of course, they are only the views of the author and mine is but one opinion.

So, you've decided to get married. Again? The majority of Aussie men who marry Filipinas have been married at least once before, sometimes two or three times. I often wonder how some of them process that decision, given their run rate to date, so to speak. If you couldn't make a marriage work with someone who grew up in your own community and culture, do you think it will be any easier, or more successful marrying someone from a very different culture?

Make no mistake, the Filipina is in many respects very different to a woman born and brought up in Australia. On the other hand, she is also a woman and so identical to the Australian variety in many ways, too. If your issues with your previous spouse were because of male-female differences and you haven't figured out where you went wrong, then there is every chance this time will be a repeat of the previous effort/s.

Many men make the mistake (and it is easily made), of thinking that a Filipina is a better marriage prospect because, as everyone knows, Asian women are subservient to their husbands, right? Wrong. In fact nothing could be further from reality. Women are 'subservient' to men only in regard to how society has defined the roles of each gender; but that has changed and is changing all the time. Filipinas are, in the main and especially those from the province, more 'old-fashioned' about the roles and responsibilities of the husband and the wife in a marriage. It is true nearly all Filipinas want a family with their foreigner husband; my wife still wants to try for #6, just in case it comes out lighter and fairer haired than the previous five!

Most Filipinas are happy to leave the 'big decisions' to their husband. That doesn't mean they will agree with what you decide or be happy to let you do as you wish. It is far more complicated than that and after nearly two decades married to my Filipina, I am still learning and making mistakes. Filipinas expect leadership from their husbands. They want you to take charge, have a plan and make decisions; providing they are the right ones. They will either have no experience or idea of what the situation entails and what needs to be done; or they will have an outcome in mind they wish to achieve.

Do not for a moment think this will be the same outcome you have in your head, even if you have done whatever it is a thousand times and your way works like a charm. Her grasp of the concept and contributing factors might be completely different to yours. She may have a very different way of achieving the same outcome to you, a way that you see as convoluted, complex and illogical, perhaps. You may make a decision in good faith and find she is

giving you 'tampo' and refuses to talk to you for a day or three and you can't understand why. Didn't you just solve her problem for her?

This book is not the venue to go into detail about the psychology behind the Filipina you love. Suffice to say there will be challenges ahead no matter how well intentioned you both are. It happens in any partnership, business, political, military or civil, and marriage is, or should be, a partnership. It won't be an equal partnership, no matter what the well meaning web sites might declare. It can never be equal because you are not equal. You both have your strengths and weaknesses and it is the sum of the parts that makes the whole. The secret, I think, is to work together to leverage your positives and minimise the negatives each and everyone of us has.

Marriage to anyone is never easy, with perhaps the rare exception of the rarer than rocking horse poo soul-mates from birth couple. I suspect even they have their moments of contention. When you look at the average, ordinary Fil-Aus couple you will find pretty much what you find in any marriage. The big attraction of the Filipina, in my opinion (and let's remember it is just my opinion), is how relatively easy it is to find one and fall in love with her and for her to fall in love with you. I won't go into a discourse on the meaning of love. I will acknowledge there is an emotion one experiences where you just know this person is the 'One', and leave it there.

Finding a Filipina has never been easier. Many years ago you had to go there, or one of them had to come to where you were. Then they created the 'penpal' concept where people browsed printed catalogues of prospective partners, exchanged letters by snail mail and over a period of many months, often years, they grew to know, be fond of and even love one another. Eventually they would meet but often, in the old days, it was after they had agreed to marry by mail or telephone call. Then came the Internet and everything sped up. I know of men who seriously, genuinely (in their minds anyway) professed they were in love after just five or six emails! Who knows? Perhaps they were because it is a very subjective and intensely personal thing and each of us are very different to the other in this regard.

When you find one, whether by looking online or meeting her while on holiday in the Pinas, they are incredibly easy to love and they do reciprocate that willingness to be your 'One'. There is truth in the more cynical view that many are looking for a way out of their current economic woes. There are more than enough real cases of Filipinas marrying to get as much from their foreigner as they can, then doing a runner. I know of three foreigners who have been murdered, most likely by their wives wanting to rid themselves of the unwanted husband but retain his much wanted wealth and worldly goods. Yet there are far more very sweet, genuine ladies who only want to be happy and to be loved and give their love in return.

On the other side of the bed there are a lot of cases, too many, of men wanting little more than a sex-slave cum domestic servant. Tragically there are cases of men who abuse their new brides physically, emotionally, financially and take it to the extreme where the poor woman is murdered by the man she trusted to give her a better life. The real tragedy is that the marriages where the wife is the baddie, the husband is usually a caring, loving and very giving guy and the opposite is true of those where the husband is abusive, manipulative and violent. What's that they say about 'opposites attracting'?

How well do you know your Filipina? Have you met her family? Do you know what is being said around you in their own language? How sure are you she can be trusted with your wealth (such as it might be and to a poor Filipina it will always be far more than what she has been used to) and your well-being? Keep in mind we all 'sell ourselves' to the other partner by presenting the best image of who we are when we first meet. It is only over time that the true character can be discerned and for some, that might come too late.

Now that you have given that a little thought, take the time to review your relationship before you commit to marriage. It is a big step and far easier to begin a marriage than to end one. More so in the Philippines itself, the last country in the world to have no divorce as such. (There are ways to annul or

nullify a marriage but they are long, complex, very expensive and often unsuccessful). If you are certain in your heart of hearts that you are making the right decision, then go for it! Give it your very best and don't listen to those who seem to relish telling you how much of a mistake you are making. There will be tough times and there will be moments when you wonder what the heck you were thinking but, if she really is the right one for you and you are willing to meet her half way, then you will find the Filipina is one of the best wives, mothers and life-long companions any man could be privileged to have by his side.

If you think you are ready for Step 1, read on. Remember the 7 P's: Prior Preparation and Planning Prevents A Piss Poor Performance. Keep that in mind and keep your sense of humour and you will make it.

Step 1 – Gather Thee Thine Paperwork

The first step, after you have found your Filipina and decided to marry, is to gather all the various documents and pieces of paper you will need to obtain the marriage license, have the ceremony and be pronounced husband and wife. The list below includes some documents that won't be required if you are not marrying in a church, particularly a Catholic Church.

For those marrying a Catholic, and 85% or so of the country is Catholic, you may have problems if you are divorced, or she is. How important is it that you marry in a church? I ask this because it does complicate matters and add to the runaround. Having said that, it might be a very important matter and not up for discussion. I would suggest you be very careful about broaching the subject with your fiancée because it is very easy for words you use that mean many things in our version of English might have but one meaning to a Filipina. Even if she is fluent in English and university educated, the context and meaning could have more of a lean one way than another. An example is I once made the mistake of telling my wife, when asked about something, 'I

don't care'. I meant it as meaning I don't mind one way or the other, whatever you prefer. Big mistake. To her it meant I don't care about whatever it was she was asking but also that I don't care about her, her feelings, her needs, the plight of endangered species on five continents and the future of the human race. Filipinos say 'up to you' to indicate the choice is yours, not theirs. That, of course, needs to be taken under caution as she may very well have an outcome in mind and it is up to you to guess the right option and act accordingly; or suffer for days and be reminded of this for decades to come.

If you have been divorced and you wish to marry in the Catholic Church it can be achieved but it will require more time and effort and some strings being pulled from as on high as you can achieve. Bishop's are the best bet and there may be a fee involved, as well as a lot of counselling and so on. If you are not a Catholic but wish to marry in the church you will have to convert. Again, this will require time and some expense to achieve, so make sure you investigate this thoroughly first and plan accordingly to allow enough time before the wedding to achieve your goal. If there is no church involved then there is still a lot to get organised. I advise making four or five copies of every document and having at least ten passport type photos. You won't need all of them but if you do, better to have spares than scrabble around at the last minute. Have at least two copies properly certified by a Justice of the Peace for Australian documents and a Notary in the Philippines. Those 'notaries' you see with a small desk and an ancient typewriter lining the street in Colon or Quiapo are not legit. Many locals use them with no problems but it is asking for trouble if a foreigner relies on such notarization. Use an attorney and pay a few peso more. It shouldn't cost more than ten or twenty dollars and the peace of mind is worth the investment.

You will need:

1. Passport, current and properly stamped by Immigration
2. Birth Certificate, an original or authorised copy, duly notarized
3. Death certificate of previous spouse if you are a widow
4. Decree Absolut from your Divorce/s
5. I.D. Photos

She will need:

1. Birth Certificate
2. Baptismal Certificate (often takes the place of a birth certificate)
3. Death certificate if she is a widower
4. Declaration of Absolute Nullity or Annulment if previously married
5. CEDULA (or Community Tax Certificate) to prove residence
6. Affidavit of Parental Consent (if 18-21)
7. Affidavit of Parental Advice (if 21-25)
8. I.D. Photos

If marrying in the church there may be a requirement to obtain a statement of good character from the parish priest or someone of some authority in the community, say the Barangay Captain, School Principal, Police chief etc. There is talk of this being a requirement for both parties and there is legislation in train but so far it has not been passed as law, to the best of my knowledge.

Your documents can be obtained from the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registrar in your state, the Australian Passport Office and the local courts. Getting copies certified as genuine copies by a JP is free, so get this done before you leave and save some time and money, not to mention running around.

Her documents can be obtained from the NSO, online or in person at one of their offices. If you attend the office, wherever it is, be prepared for a long wait. We lined up from early morning for several hours for a document needed to bring my wife to Australia, only to be advised they had just made the document we needed available by online order. Back then, (2005) you could order online but you had to pay for it first at a bank, then include the official receipt number when ordering online. Once they had confirmation from the bank they processed the order and we received the document by LBC courier a week or two later. These days you can order and pay online with a valid

Australian (but not Filipino issued) VISA/Mastercard credit or debit card, or through online banking for BDO and Union Bank, or at most branches.

Her birth certificate will cost P315 per copy, a CENOMAR (more of this in Step 2) P415 per copy, if you pay through a bank. If you use your Australian credit/debit card the price is US\$20 and US\$25 respectively, more than twice the local rate. This sounds all very simple, but you forgot the Filipino Factor. There is every chance your Filipina's request for her documents receives a 'Negative Certification' response. This doesn't mean you get a refund, rather it means there is no record, paper or electronic, held by the NSO.

There is every chance the birth of your fiancée was not recorded, the record was made to the municipality and they didn't forward it to the NSO or someone made a mistake somewhere along the line. There is a process for 'delayed registration' of the birth but generally there will be some record held by your fiancée or her family. Failing that, a Baptismal Certificate might be available and this holds a fair amount of weight and can be used to obtain a certificate of birth. It is best if you sit down with your fiancée and work through this book with her, checking off all the items you will need and making sure you are clear on what she has and might not have that she needs. Be prepared for some confusion and possibly explanations that make little sense to us foreigners. While most things there are similar to home, they do have a different way of doing things, remember. It is also very Filipino to 'adjust' the details to make sure no one is embarrassed or made to feel uncomfortable and the versions of events can sound a little far fetched or change from one telling to the next. This might indicate something is going on, but it is just as likely not to and be simply a case of them misunderstanding what is expected of them by you.

Once you have certified copies of all required documents, you are ready for Step 2.

Step 2 – The CENOMAR

The CENOMAR is the Certificate of No Marriage Record that both of you must produce to obtain the marriage License. It is issued by the NSO and can be obtained online, preferably at the same time you order her birth certificate, the death certificate of her previous spouse, or yours if you were previously married to a Filipina who his now deceased.

When I obtained the CENOMAR for my wife in 2002 there was no requirement for me to have one. Since then the law has changed, probably due to the increase in foreigners marrying a second or third Filipina. My wife's CENOMAR proved very little other than in the period prior to the two years immediately before the application she was not recorded as having been married in the Philippines. It stated data for the period from two years prior up to the date of application was not available, which made the whole thing rather worthless, given she may have been currently married at that time to someone else and there was no way of ascertaining this! Nevertheless, we had the required piece of paper and that was all that mattered.

Once you order and pay for your CENOMAR, be prepared to wait for the delivery of the actual documents. If you give a Philippines address then it will, according to the NSO website, take between 3-9 working days after payment in Metro Manila, Metro Cebu and Metro Davao. Anywhere else in the provinces, within the Philippines, you must allow 4-9 working days. If you need the document in 1-2 days then you must apply in person at one of the Census Serblis Centers. There are 6 in Metro Manila, 17 in Luzon, 7 in the Visayas and 10 in Mindanao. Expect long queues at all of them.

If you want the documents delivered to an overseas address the advertised delay is between 6-8 weeks. You can, however, 'avail' of the special courier services and get your paperwork within 5-8 working days. Email the NSO at ecensus2@census.gov.ph and good luck. A Filipino friend of mine with a very

Pinoy sense of humour advised me that the CENOMAR is only valid until you get married, the birth certificate is valid for life and the best news, the death certificate never expires. Great value for a few hundred pesos a pop!

Before you start planning your wedding timeline, be advised there may be a further delay if the record you require is not an electronic one, but rather a paper version. Not all paper records have been added to the electronic record, so some birth certificates from distant provinces might not be available. Another reason is that the birth or death was registered late and hasn't been included yet. If this is the case, add another 10-15 working days, although they promise to advise of this by email if they need to search the microfilm records manually.

You will also need a CNI, or Certificate of No Impediment to Marriage (also called a Legal Capacity to Marry certificate). This can ONLY be issued by the Consular Services department within the Australian Embassy, Manila. You can obtain a copy of the form from the Embassy website and mail it to them with certified copies of your documents, or you can attend the Embassy itself in Makati. Always allow plenty of time for the processing and mailing of the document. It is pretty quick and easy to get it issued on the spot at the Embassy, providing you have all your paperwork in your possession (see Step 1).

If you are an Australian permanent resident, but not a citizen, you will need to obtain the CNI from the embassy of your own country in the Philippines, providing they have one. Otherwise it may be possible to obtain one from the Local Civil Registrar at City Hall. If that is the case, you will need to double check this with them first and allow more time for the process, so take this into account when planning your wedding.

Once you have all the documents listed in Step 1, You have obtained your CNI and you both have a CENOMAR, you can proceed to Step 3.

Step 3 – Pre Marriage Seminar

The pre-marriage seminar, also called the 'Pop Con' (for 'Population Control') is a bit of a lottery. For civil weddings it might be 20 minutes, 30 minutes, an hour or two or all day; depends on the municipality where you do it (which will be where you apply for the Marriage License – Step 4). Do not be surprised if it is waived, or you are offered the opportunity to pay some kind of 'Express Fee' and get the certificate of attendance right away, allowing you to immediately apply for the marriage license.

For church weddings, particularly Catholic ones, be prepared for a three day ordeal. There is every possibility it will be held in a room packed with other couples, there will probably be only fans and no air conditioning and it will most likely not be in English. Some priests will counsel the couple in English and with just the two of you there if your fiancée knows the priest well, pays the right amount of donation and so on; but there is no guarantee.

The stated purpose of this process is to ensure anyone thinking of getting married in the Philippines is doing it for life. It conveys the gravity of the decision and also offers advice on family planning, resolution of any problems between spouses and so forth. Of course, to an Australian, if they understand what is being said, much of this will seem archaic and very old fashioned. If you are not religious, or share your fiancée's beliefs, it can be tedious and even unsettling. This is how it is in the Philippines and there is no getting around it.

I would advise you don't debate anything with whoever is facilitating the seminar. Just smile, nod and get it over with. If you are a devout person then it will be a more enjoyable experience, at least if it is within the church you belong to. Everyone's mileage varies, after all. Keep in mind it may be a tough assignment for the clerk who has to do the seminar. They may be embarrassed that their English is not up to snuff or they could be having a bad day, personally. We are all human and so my best advice is to ask, when

booking the seminar at the Local Civil registry, if you can pay an 'Express Fee' and waive attending the seminar on the grounds you are older and mature, or something like that. It might work, it might not, but keep smiling the whole time. I was prepared to spend a few thousand peso to avoid a two day slog (as I had been warned it would be) but it turned out to be less than half an hour.

Once you have the certificate of attendance, however long you may have endured the seminar process, you are ready to proceed to Step 4, getting the marriage license.

Step 4- The Marriage License

You are almost there! The marriage license is a license to get married. It attests that you have met all the requirements under Philippines Law. That law, specifically, is **The Family Code of the Philippines** (Executive Order No. 209, July 6, 1987, as amended by Executive Order No. 227, July 17, 1987), a reprint of which is included with this book. They take marriage pretty seriously in the Philippines, so if you want to call your fiancée 'asawa' ('spouse' in Tagalog, 'wife' in Cebuano, 'bana' meaning husband), you better make sure you cross your i's and dot your t's!

As previously mentioned, the marriage license is obtained from the local civil registry. Both of you must attend as the groom fills out the left half of the form; the bride fills 'up' the right side, to put things in the vernacular. You might be able to do the pre-marriage seminar there and then; we did, but then we were at a small municipality in the province. If your fiancée is living in a large city they may have scheduled times for the 'pop con'. Then again, you might get lucky and they simply issue you a certificate of attendance on the spot. Don't forget to ask, preferably with a P500 note in your hand at the time.

The basic procedure is that once you have the marriage license you must wait ten days before you have the actual ceremony. These ten days can be calculated rather differently, depending where you are, who you are and who you know. I know of couples who were issued a back-dated license and they were married the same day or the day after. I know couples who waited the full ten days and then got married within the 120 days the license is valid for. My wife and I were issued our license on the 2nd of the month and were married on the 12th, which by my calculation is ten days. The mayor who married us forward dated the marriage certificate to the 13th but performed the ceremony on the 12th as she was not available the next day. I didn't try to explain that 2 plus 10 equals 12, not 13, but she seemed to think you need ten days and then you can marry the day after. Just be wary of this when you make your ceremony arrangements if time is tight and you have a plane to catch and a job to rush back to.

Some registry offices will have you attend, present all your paperwork (Step 1) and issue you a slip of paper that tells you when to attend the pre-marriage seminar. You attend on the allotted day and receive your certificate of attendance. You then have to go back to the registry and present that to claim your marriage license. The license will be dated from then and the ten days wait now begins. This is something you need to take into account because, as I said, in some registry offices they may have scheduled seminars and you might have missed the one for this week. If they hold them on Tuesdays and Thursdays and you apply on a Friday, you have to wait until the following Tuesday for the next seminar... providing it is not booked out. This could add another four days to the timeline, then the ten to wait and then you get married. If you only have two weeks vacation time, you might be having the ceremony in the Departures Hall at Nino Acquino International Airport!

Once you do receive the marriage license, make copies and have them notarized or stamped at the registry. They may have a photocopier (Xerox), they may not. I have been to court houses that out-source their 'Xeroxing', sending someone in a trike into town to get copies made with just enough petty cash for the return trip and the copying. Even a copy that hasn't been

notarized or stamped should be made and kept separate from the other documents. People do lose vital paperwork and when you consider how much effort it is to obtain them in the first place, a little extra effort arranging a little backup is worth the time and pesos.

Once you have the marriage license you are ready for Step 5, the marriage ceremony.

Step 5 – The Marriage Ceremony

It is hard to describe the feeling of euphoria when you walk out of the registry office with your marriage license in hand. Your whole life together is now ahead of you and the only step left, is the wedding itself. If only that were the case. You have your whole lives together in front of you and if that includes either of you relocating to the other's country; there is a lot more paperwork, fee paying and queuing to be done. But don't let that spoil the moment. Enjoy it, relish it and remember how great you feel at this point. It was worth all the effort and perhaps they have a point regarding how involved getting married is in the Philippines. It is not something to be rushed into or taken lightly. No Vegas style wedding chapels dot the countryside there.

The marriage license will need to be shown to the priest, if marrying in a church, or to whoever else is officiating. That can be a judiciary officer, such as a judge or the mayor. It can be a minister of religion, military commander or the captain of a ship or aircraft. The latter trio only have authority to marry if there are good reasons why you can't get yourself in front of a priest or judiciary officer. The plane must be flying and the ship must be sailing and the military commander... one imagines the Abu Sayyaf having surrounded the resort, a couple decide to tie the knot before who knows what may happen

and so ask the officer in charge of the local army detachment to do the business. Or perhaps her father is a general, it happens.

While technically speaking one doesn't pay judiciary officers for the service, if held in the registry office or mayor's chambers, you can always offer a donation to 'the poor'. Judges also like to be appreciated, how much depends on a lot of factors that are best left to your fiancée to handle. Just ask how much will she need and hand over half a dozen or so of those big notes with Nino Acquino on them, or two or three of the very big ones. Most people I spoke to when researching this point said between two and three thousand was the going rate. For me, I like to leave judges and mayors smiling; you never know when you might need to mention to someone that Mayor Dong or Judge Boy did your wedding...

Organising the actual wedding ceremony and reception can be a challenge if your bride is from the province. These days most resorts are online, so you can find a venue easily enough. When I got married it was all arranged via telephone calls to quiz the wife and try and find somewhere nearby to stay, to hold the reception and so on. My wife hadn't been married before and neither had any of her sisters. Her parents had married in a simple ceremony in the local church with a very modest reception at their nipa hut afterwards. Nobody had any experience of weddings, really, especially not one as important as a wedding with a foreigner groom.

Were we in Cebu city we could have accomplished everything much more easily and without too much hassle. Finding the venue around Calape was a challenge, but we managed it, staying in a resort owned by an American and his wife. They were back in the States at the time, so I had to email them, then they would email the wife's relatives left in charge of the resort and then the reply would come back the same way. My wife could have gone there and spoken to them directly but she wasn't confident of arranging the kind of wedding reception I had in mind, so I got the vague responses and usual 'up to you's' that save face in these situations.

Suffice to say, other than the dates we would be staying at the resort and the fact we were having a wedding reception, little else was set in concrete before I arrived in-country. We had to organise the dress, the photographer, the catering, wedding cars, guest list, invitations, flowers and the paperwork, all within two weeks from date of arrival. In between there was Holy Week, or Easter, as this was the only leave I could swing from my work, having been there just a few months earlier in January, and before that in November. The bottom line was it all got done, the wedding happened and now we're a dozen or more years down the track with kids, house, cars and all the usual stuff every married couple has. The message here is: This Too Shall Pass. No matter how insurmountable some things may seem, you will get through them.

The Marriage Certificate

Once you are legally married a marriage certificate will be issued... but not on the spot. The 'certificate' you may receive on the day is not the same thing as an NSO Certificate of Marriage. Under Article 23 of the Family Code, whoever solemnized the wedding ceremony must furnish a copy of the marriage certificate to the couple; plus within fifteen days they have to send the second and third copies to the local civil registry office in the municipality where the marriage took place. This may not be the same civil registry as where the marriage license was issued, so that might delay matters. The local civil registry must then lodge a copy of the marriage certificate with the NSO, who then record the marriage and, when requested, will provide, for a fee, a NSO certified copy of the marriage certificate (on security paper). This is what is needed by the Embassy to include in your visa application.

The reality is weddings can be faked and so too the marriage certificate. By having it registered first with the local civil registry and then the NSO, it reduces the risk of fraudulent registration and adds weight to the validity of the documents and claimed status. If you are in a hurry to get your visa processed and your new bride to Australia, the best advice is that while it can

take up to 9 months or more for the process to take its course, you can expedite it. Or rather your wife or her family can. This is a very good time for you to keep your kano long nose out of things and let them take the marriage certificate to the local registry, ask for expedited processing, pay the fees and then push it along to the NSO.

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