

WORLD NEWS

Cyprus is the Gretna Green of the Middle East: people fly in to marry outside the strictures of their religion or families, then jet out

LOUISE CALLAGHAN



Paphos

The Mediterranean sea swelled in the background and sunburnt holiday-makers looked on as the young couple embraced on the jetty. He wore flip-flops. She wore a sundress and a crown of white roses.

Two years after they had met while working in a Tel Aviv ice cream shop, they were finally married – not in Israel, where they both live, but in Cyprus, the real Love Island.

“We couldn’t have done this at home,” laughed Lyvia Stahl Zanella, 35, as her brown curls whipped in the sea breeze. “So we just came here.”

Every year 3,000 couples from all corners of the Middle East marry in Cyprus – many in defiance of their family and religious traditions. Unlike most countries in the region, Cyprus allows civil marriages.

For the Romeos and Juliets of the region, unable to marry at home because they belong to different religions or sects, this is their default destination. For others it is a chance to marry in a ceremony free of religious overtones.

With a round of applause from the five onlookers – two of them Sunday Times journalists – Zanella and her boyfriend Oren Sharabi, 27, became a married couple.

When the couple, both liberal Jews, decided to get married, they did not want an Orthodox Jewish wedding ceremony – the only kind available in Israel.

So, like many of their friends, they got on a 55-minute flight from Tel Aviv to Cyprus. Inside the cool stone walls of Paphos town hall, on the island’s southern coast, they stood – eyes brimming, hands clasped – for a five-minute ceremony before signing a few documents. They were married in time for lunch.

“That was easy,” laughed Zanella, after the Cypriot official pronounced them husband and wife.

“This is our Gretna Green,” said Stella Verdi, 54, a British-Cypriot wedding planner, as Zanella and Sharabi posed for photographs.

Over the past 15 years she has arranged hundreds of weddings on the island for couples from the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Israel and even the UK. Often she is their only guest and witness.

“Sometimes people haven’t even told their families,” she said. “And they ask if it’s possible to not write the religion on the marriage certificate. They really worry about that. Sometimes their families find out when they send them a picture of the wedding itself.”

In the courtyard outside another

SPYROS CHRISTOFI



Lyvia Stahl Zanella and Oren Sharabi embrace after their wedding in Paphos, Cyprus

“The wedding costs a few hundred euros and takes a couple of hours

The real Love Island, where couples defy taboos to wed

couple waited in the shade for their turn, the bride only just keeping her balance in high stilettos. On some summer mornings more than a dozen couples queue to marry.

In Larnaca, to the east, the number is even higher. Couples there jet into the airport straight from Beirut or Tel Aviv, drive to the town hall, show their birth certificates and pledge to honour each other until death do them part.

In the afternoon they fly back. The entire operation costs a few hundred euros and takes a couple of hours: a stark contrast to the lavish religious ceremonies common in the Middle East, where celebrations can last for days and involve hundreds of family members.

A couple from Lebanon, Ahmed and Delphine, waited on the road outside their embassy in Nicosia for their marriage certificate to be checked by officials.

While neither of them is religious, Ahmed’s family is Muslim and Delphine’s is Christian. In Lebanon, as in Israel, civil marriages are not permitted. Religious leaders sometimes lecture couples on everything from intimacy to asset management before letting them marry.

“If we had got married in Lebanon, one of us would have had to renounce our religion,” Ahmed said.

“If we did it in the church, the priest

would have given her lessons on married life. It’s really complicated and bureaucratic. Instead we came here. It’s like a holiday and a wedding.”

Cypriot town halls have become one of the few places where Israelis can rub shoulders with people from neighbouring countries – often unknowingly – even though their governments may be sworn enemies.

They queue next to each other to sign

their marriage contracts and will return home with the same paperwork.

On each side of the chasms that divide the Middle East there are young people who do not want to be constrained by religion or sect.

“It’s easy here,” said Doxa Economidou, an administrator at Paphos town hall. “No one discriminates. Everyone is welcome. This is the island of Aphrodite.”

@louiseelisabeth

US police braced for millions of untraceable guns

Danny Fortson

The era of downloadable guns has arrived after a Texas man won a five-year battle with the American government for the right to publish blueprints for firearms that can be produced on a simple home 3D printer.

Cody Wilson, who calls himself a “crypto-anarchist”, described his gun as a “political project” with the goal of “undermining the liberal state”.

Wilson, 30, runs Defense Distributed, which tested the first 3D-printed gun in 2013. He called it “the Liberator”, a mostly plastic, single-shot firearm. Wilson uploaded its schematics, which were

swiftly downloaded by more than 100,000 people. The Department of State ordered him to cease, claiming that what he was doing amounted to the illegal export of arms.

Wilson’s legal battle was mostly self-funded, with help from the Second Amendment Foundation, a gun-rights group. His Liberator spawned a small but passionate community of makers of “homebrew” weapons.

The capabilities of the guns are limited. As 3D printing gets more advanced, and the printers themselves become cheaper, however, what is a fringe activity could become widespread – especially if Wilson makes available for free the blueprints of hundreds or thousands of



weapons. Wilson said “a few thousand” people have signed up to upload designs for components or entire weapons.

His surprise victory alarmed law enforcement officials and anti-gun advocates, who warn that it could undermine attempts to curtail gun rights.

The downloaded “ghost guns” will not have serial numbers, which police use to track the purchase history and ownership of weapons used in crimes.

David Chipman, a former special agent with the American government’s Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms who works at the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, called for laws to be introduced to identify downloadable weapons. Chipman said: “The traceability of a firearm recovered in crime is essential. Twenty years from now, when there are millions of untraceable guns, they’ll say, ‘It’s too late.’ We need to pass laws now to catch up with technology.”

There are an estimated 265m guns in America, a nation of 328m people. Supply is not a problem and

Wilson: funded legal fight via bitcoin

the rise of untraceable guns, which has come in response to the most basic of new buying rules, has unsettled law enforcement officers. The Los Angeles police department said this month that it had seen an increase in homemade semi-automatic assault rifles and pistols used by the city’s gangs.

Asked if he was concerned that he was making a serious problem worse, Wilson was dismissive.

“I won’t be moralised into saying, ‘Well, it’s better that some areas of scientific inquiry and human creation just not be explored.’ That just doesn’t sound compelling to me,” he said. “My zeal for this is of a political and philosophical bent.”

A law school dropout who takes inspiration from Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, he funded his legal fight primarily through bitcoin, the cryptocurrency beloved of arms and drug dealers.

Wilson declined to say how much of the cryptocurrency he holds but added that it was “enough to feel confident in fighting the government for years”.

New Yorkers in uproar over city clampdown on Airbnb

Josh Glancy
New York

This city has some of the most expensive hotel rooms in the world, so naturally its Airbnb market has boomed. But a bill passed by the city council last week threatens to decimate the home-sharing company’s operations here.

New York joins a growing number of cities that have regulated Airbnb, part of a wider crackdown on the perceived excesses of the sharing economy.

The bill, which was passed 45-0 on Wednesday, seeks to clamp down on tenants and landlords who are making extra money by renting out apartments to tourists on a short-term basis, a trend the city claims has fuelled soaring rents. Bill de Blasio, the mayor, is expected to sign the bill into law very soon.

It will compel all Airbnb and other home-sharing firms to pass on the identities and addresses of its hosts to the city’s Office of Special Enforcement, or face a fine. The hosts will have to reveal whether the location is their primary residence.

The bill’s effect is likely to be momentous. When a similar law was passed last year in San Francisco there was an immediate 50% drop in Airbnb listings, with 10,000 posted in August 2017 and 5,500 in January 2018.

Most Airbnb listings in New York are technically illegal, according to state law, which declares that renting an entire home for fewer than 30 days is not allowed unless the owner is present the whole time. But the law has turned a blind eye up until now.

Many New Yorkers are outraged by the ruling, which will curtail what has become a flourishing cottage industry, with cash-strapped residents using the extra money to

meet the city’s exorbitant cost of living.

The New York Post lambasted the city council for its close funding links to the hotel industry, which along with the hotel workers’ union has lobbied ferociously against home sharing.

In a rare show of accord the New York Daily News, a rival tabloid, implored the city to “leave the hell alone the bulk of Airbnb hosts, ordinary people who are hurting no one while trying to make a few dollars on the side to cover their costs”.

Airbnb ran a well-funded but ultimately unsuccessful PR campaign against the bill. New York is the company’s largest American market, but there are also fears that being heavily regulated in such a tourist hot spot could tarnish their brand globally.

Other cities, including Vancouver and Barcelona, have similar laws. London has some regulation too, limiting the number of days that a host can rent a property annually.

“After taking hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from

the hotel industry, we’re not surprised the city council voted to protect the profits of big hotels and not their own constituents, who rely on home sharing to pay the bills,” said Liz DeBold Fusco for Airbnb.

“The fix was in from the start and now New Yorkers will be subject to unchecked, aggressive harassment and privacy violations, rubber stamped by the city council.”

Philip Edwards, an Airbnb host who gave testimony to the council, claimed he is able to afford his home in the city only because he rents it out short-term when he travels for work.

“This is my own home, I am not taking off housing stock,” he said.

“Your bill doesn’t just attack bad-actor landlords trying to convert entire buildings. It blocks struggling individuals for surviving for the benefit of the hotel industry.”

The city council argues that curbing illegal home sharing can help to reduce rocketing rents in a city that is in the grip of an affordable housing crisis.

A study conducted by the council in May showed a strong correlation between neighbourhoods with the most annual Airbnb listings and those that had the highest rent hikes between 2009 and 2016.

“Because of our city’s housing crisis, every single unit is precious,” said Carline Rivera, the councillor who brought the bill.

“We’re not going after people who are legally supplementing their income, but we need to stop people illegally taking housing out of the stock we desperately need. We have 62,000 people in our [homeless] shelter system including 20,000 children.”

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