

Marriages Made on High

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Couples take plunge in thin air - Ranger Rick's heli-weddings start life's adventure.

Their marriage, alas, was on the rocks before it began.

Almost 8,000 feet on the rocks, to be exact, where British residents Seamus and Diane O'Sullivan exchanged vows with a herd of bighorn sheep on one side and a lot of empty space on the other.

"We wanted to do something spectacular," says Diane, standing on the rugged shoulder of Mount Charles Stewart high in the Alberta Rockies. "A mountain seemed a lot more exciting than getting married in a registry office."

Diane pauses, sips her champagne and awaits the return of the helicopter for the 10-minute flight back to Canmore. On the scree slope in the background, wedding photographer Malcolm Carmichael is bent double, meticulously picking through thousands of baseball-sized rocks for the champagne cork.

"Found it!" he exclaims, explaining that every cork and tossed garter must be recovered and packed out. To leave one item behind could be enough for park authorities to put a halt to helicopter weddings, which have become a staple offering of Banff-based marriage commissioner Rick Kunelius.

In addition to heli-weddings, Kunelius also tailors ceremonies for mountain bikers, horseback riders, hardcore mountain climbers, whitewater rafters and skiers.

"So far we haven't had a location request that we haven't been able to get to," boasts Kunelius, whose tanned good looks, handlebar moustache and easygoing demeanour earned him the nickname Ranger Rick during his 22 years as a Parks Canada warden.

An expert climber, backcountry skier and outdoorsman, Kunelius has turned the adventure-wedding business into a lucrative calling since leaving Parks Canada several years ago to become a development consultant and bed-and-breakfast proprietor.

He applied for and received his Alberta marriage commissioner's licence five years ago when he realized that a lot of people are looking for unusual and out-of-the-way wedding locations.

This year, Kunelius will marry more than 100 couples at venues ranging from the top of Lake Louise's Mount Whitehorn to the edge of Peyto Lake. Like the O'Sullivans, many of the couples will be foreigners who dream of getting married under a blue-sky roof framed by walls of granite.

"The most serious social contract of your life doesn't need to be a sombre event," Kunelius explains.

Serious? Some of his ceremonies have been downright bizarre.

Several years ago, Ranger Rick guided a couple who wanted to be married on the summit of Banff's Mount Hector. The wedding party began the arduous climb in the middle of the night by traversing a glacier, then began scaling the peak itself.

Just one pitch from the summit - only a few hundred feet - the groom glanced at his watch and asked the climbing party to stop. It was exactly 8 a.m. - the same time he and the bride had decided to get engaged a year earlier - the same time the pair had professed their love for one another a year before that.

The groom looked around and said, "That's it, pound in the pins (pitons). We're doing it here," Kunelius says. "We were still roped up with several thousand feet of open space beneath us."

"We never did finish the climb."

Another time, Kunelius was marrying a couple on Tunnel Mountain near the Banff townsite. It was a chilly, blustery day, and the bride's knees started knocking together.

"All of a sudden I heard music coming from beneath her dress," Kunelius says. "I thought, 'What the heck is that?'"

Turned out the bride's clacking knees had set off the musical garter on her thigh, which nicely complimented the pint-sized CD-player and speakers Kunelius cars around in his knapsack to infuse the woods with Mozart and Grieg.

Kunelius once used a mule as a wedding witness, and he once turned around to see two determined ground squirrels munching on a bride's orchid bouquet.

One ceremony was temporarily halted to let a group of bighorn sheep pass through the proceedings.

And then there was the time Kunelius married a Yellowknife couple in the spa at the Banff Springs Hotel, an artificial waterfall sloshing behind them.

The wedding party wore swimsuits and towels, and afterwards topped their outfits off with Russian fur hats when they decided to celebrate in the outdoor hot tub.

"A lot of the weddings I do with Rick hardly qualify as working," says photographer Carmichael, who rarely has a dull moment snapping the shutter at a Ranger Rick ceremony.

The mountain weather, of course, is less predictable, with mood swings rivalling those of Julia Roberts in *Runaway Bride*. He's married lots of couples in fleece and Gor-Tex, the grooms wearing long underwear beneath formal black slacks.

"I tell people to expect the worst and we'll hope for the best," Kunelius says, picking his way along an alpine ridge to the helicopter pickup zone.

On this day, it's hard to imagine a more glorious mountain setting. Indian summer bathes the Rockies with tilted golden sunlight; the windless silence above treeline intensifies the humbling space and distance.

Suddenly, the helicopter reappears beneath us down the valley, as tiny and perfectly profiled as a Christmas tree ornament slung between the peaks.

"Spectacular," says Diane.

"Absolutely fabulous," says Seamus.

It's Diane's first time in the mountains. Anywhere. It's both she and Seamus' first time in a helicopter.

All told, the wedding costs \$900, including the flight. Both say they couldn't imagine a better ceremony. They'll honeymoon in Western Canada for two more weeks, then it's back to Britain and business as usual.

And Kunelius? He's already thinking ahead to later that afternoon when he'll slip on his cowboy boots to marry a couple on horseback.

Ranger Rick rides again.



British couple Seamus and Diane O'Sullivan celebrate their wedding with a high-altitude kiss on the shoulder of Mount Charles Stewart.