

The French Connection

For 31-year-old adventurer, photographer and former French national **Géraldine Sandhilya**, the real excitement began when she married her Indian husband and had Leonie, their gorgeous Indo-French baby girl

BY CHARLENE FLANAGAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
GÉRALDINE SANDHILYA

THEY say love happens quite unexpectedly. You accidentally stumble across that one person, and before you even realise what's happened, you've fallen for them. The story of Géraldine and her dance-instructor husband, Praveen, is no different. After studying Travel and Tourism in Rouen, France, a young Géraldine was eager to explore the world, her trusty camera in hand. She found herself moving to the United States and Australia before making her way to India in 2010.

Quite unexpectedly, she fell in love with India and has lived here ever since. What cemented her decision to make this move permanent was meeting her husband at a Salsa dance party that was incidentally, hosted by her brother-in-law. Of course, her adventures didn't die down, particularly after she landed a job with Royal Enfield and biked her way around the country, committing her travels to memory in the form of photographs. However, in 2014 when Praveen and Géraldine decided to make their relationship official, she decided it was time that travel took a back seat. ➔



LICENCE TO WED

Marriage is a lifetime commitment, and it usually takes a lot of hard work, compromise and understanding to make it a success. For Géraldine and Praveen, the decision to have a wedding which celebrated both cultures was undisputed by family and friends. “We’re both very attached to our origins, so our wedding was a mix of French and Indian traditions. Since I’m not religious and don’t practice any faith, we chose to exchange vows a little differently. Praveen is a Hindu, but his faith hasn’t really had any negative impact on our

marital bliss. In fact, I quite love the happy spirit, colour and joyfulness of it,” says Géraldine.

And from then on, life couldn’t get better. The newlyweds had a blissful honeymoon period and when it was time to get back to the real world, they were a little reluctant. However, life happens and they soon threw themselves back into work—Géraldine pursued photography and Praveen went back to dance instruction. Soon, Géraldine realised that she wanted to pursue photography fulltime, and opened her

very own studio out of her home in New Delhi called Géraldine Sandhilya Photography. It was then that she began her newest adventure, specialising in maternity, newborn and child photography.

BABY TALK

Watching mums with their babies on a daily basis, made Géraldine feel like, perhaps, there was something missing from her otherwise-perfect life. However, when she realised she was late, she got a little nervous. “I had my reasons to believe that I might be pregnant but



when I found out that I was not, I was very disappointed,” she admits. That’s perhaps the moment she realised she was ready to start a family. “Since Praveen is eight years older than I am, he was ready for a baby long before I was. So, when I told him I was ready to try for one, he was excited. I’m glad I didn’t have to convince him one bit,” she tells us, excitedly.

After that, life couldn’t get better for the happy couple. They began trying and enjoyed their jobs tremendously, in the mean time. However, about five weeks into her pregnancy, Géraldine realised she was expecting. “I was so engrossed in work that I didn’t realise I was going to become a mother, until I was five weeks pregnant! When I told Praveen that we

were going to be parents, his reaction was rather lukewarm. I was a little taken aback with his reaction because I expected a little more enthusiasm from him, but he didn’t show any emotion,” recalls Géraldine.

“We were in France on holiday when we discovered I was pregnant. Because it was still early in the pregnancy, we didn’t want to say anything to anybody, and wanted to wait the standard three months before we broke the news. But since we were leaving in a few days, and I didn’t think this was something that could be said over a phone call, we decided to tell my family and friends about it when I was just six weeks pregnant,” says Géraldine. She adds, “Of

course, they didn’t believe me because Praveen and I love joking around, but after showing them the test, they were ecstatic! Somehow, though, Praveen was still very neutral to the news.”

When the couple finally got back to India, and they went for their first ultrasound, Praveen became a whole new person. “I think he was in shock and didn’t believe the news till we went for our first check-up. After he heard our baby’s heartbeat, his face lit up! I have never seen him so happy,” she says with a smile.

PREGNANCY BLISS

For Géraldine, the cultural gap began to show during the time she was expecting, something that added to her already difficult trimester. She experienced ➤



a severe bout of morning sickness during her first trimester, and kept herself busy to avoid thinking about the nausea. “Praveen, of course, encouraged me to stay home more, and relax. He didn’t understand my need to keep busy! He was extremely supportive and nurturing, but he didn’t realise I needed to work and stay active,” says Géraldine. That’s when the tension began to creep in. “It is not in my nature to be inactive. Moreover, I believe that pregnancy is not a disability or sickness. In Europe, doctors encourage pregnant women to stay active and behave normal. Of course, only a few things are not recommended, like carrying very heavy bags, or adventure sports like parachuting, skiing, or motorbiking. In fact, everything is

permitted. You’re encouraged to do everything you’d normally do, and doctors even recommend a bit of exercise and physical activity till you reach full-term,” she says.

However, Indian families tend to be overprotective, and because of the difference in opinions, Géraldine experienced a little tension. “It was difficult to explain to my in-laws that I needed to stay active. They were of the opinion that ‘one can’t be too careful’. With them, it was always ‘Don’t bend’ or ‘Don’t carry this’. I was constantly told what to eat and what I could or couldn’t do during my pregnancy. It did create a lot of stress and tension between us. But I knew my actions and behaviour

wouldn’t harm my baby. What’s better than a mother’s instincts, right?”

But, the disagreements all seems trivial in the light of the bigger picture—Praveen and Géraldine were soon going to be parents, and nothing could really dampen their spirits. Moreover, Géraldine felt completely cared for, and loved by Praveen and the rest of the family. “After I decided that they only meant well, I didn’t really let the disagreements bother me. I knew my body best, and I did heed a little of their advice, if not all. But Praveen was incredible throughout. He’d give me massages when my feet or back would ache; he took me out a lot because he knew how much I loved to travel. He

even encouraged me to pay my family a visit! I really couldn’t have been happier,” she says.

Before long, Géraldine had established a healthy routine. She read as much as she could and even enrolled in birthing classes to help her prepare for her delivery. “I didn’t know what to expect, so I tried to prepare myself mentally and physically for everything. I even had a doula that would come home before Leonie was born, to help me with some exercises which I could do at the time of delivery. Apart from this, I followed Baby Centre notifications regarding the evolution of my pregnancy,” she says.

WELCOME TO THE WORLD

Finally, when Géraldine was nearing her due date, in her 41st week of pregnancy, she went into labour. That lasted 24 hours. “I believe in doing everything naturally. And since pregnancy is a completely natural process, I wanted my delivery to be natural too! In Europe, a C-section is only used in case of an emergency. I’m a perfectly healthy young woman, and wanted to do things naturally,” she says. However, since she had created such a cosy home for Leonie all those nine months, it seemed like she just didn’t want to come greet her parents. “For the first 18 hours, I felt pain, but it was bearable. Then, before I could realise it, the contractions grew incredibly strong. All the exercises which I had practiced before were useless. I forgot everything and couldn’t think straight. For about five hours, the contractions were excruciating that I felt like I was going to die. I can barely remember what happened during those few hours as I felt like my spirit had left my body. I tried to move, to sit on the pregnancy ball, to get a massage, to take a shower, but nothing could help me. My husband and the doula were completely helpless because I was not responding to their coaching. I was exhausted from being awake for 24 hours.”

She continues, “When I was finally moved to the delivery room, I had to only spend about 30 minutes pushing. Of course, by then I was ready to give up but the doctor was very encouraging, and kept giving me updates on my





was only trying to help but he didn't realise that I needed to create a special bond with my baby. And for this, I needed intimacy and the time to enjoy my baby. I wanted my time alone with her and didn't want to be surrounded all the time. Besides, taking care of only one baby is not that big of a deal. I can understand that some people need help when they have more children, but it was just Leonie. I knew I could handle it." Praveen, on the other hand, was very nervous around Leonie. "I'm glad I got to help him and guide him. He couldn't do much when it came to her feeds but he helped me with everything else. Today, he's excellent when it comes to changing her diapers or bathing her!" she explains.

MY BABY & ME

Leonie has been a blessing to the happy couple, and is the perfect combination of the two, despite the fact that most of their family and friends feel she looks a lot like Praveen. "Leonie has brown eyes and brown hair. She has my complexion but the best part about my baby girl is that she gets her strong personality from the both of us. She's stubborn, very independent and super active," Gerldine says of Leonie.

From the time she was born, Leonie has been a very active, responsive and alert baby. "Leonie is a very curious baby, and she loves spending time outdoors, exploring her little world. But, right since she was born, she was a very responsive baby. I remember each time I nursed her, she would look straight into my eyes, and I could feel that she knew who I was. That was a magical experience."

Moreover, she enjoys a different bond with her father. "Praveen plays a big role in her life. He's a very hands-on father and I feel truly blessed to have him in my life. He's extremely supportive and helps me in every way he can. He changes her diapers, gives her a bath, takes her for a walk, cuddles her, and is constantly playing with her. After talking to many Indian dads, I realised that not many of them help with the care of their babies. Yes, they are supportive but aren't very involved in day-to-day chores," explains Géraldine.

Leonie is 11 months old today, is independent and has a very strong personality. "She knows what she wants, just like her parents," Géraldine says with a laugh. "She keeps impressing us and our relatives. She started walking all by herself when she was only eight and a half months. And I hadn't noticed it before until a friend pointed it out—she never sits! She's always walking or running somewhere or the other. She can't sit still. She's always active, wants to explore here and there, wants to touch this and that, wants to try absolutely everything. She also takes risks trying to do 'grown up' things and that can sometimes cause some small head bumps. It's actually exhausting for the both of us. She definitely keeps us on our toes," she admits.

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

Like all parents, Praveen and Géraldine wish for their daughter to grow up to be a good, compassionate and independent human being. "It's going to be difficult finding a balance at first, but if we

teach her the right values and morals, we're confident she'll make the right decisions. Of course, despite doing our best for her, we will always be scared for her. We will always fear whether she's made the right choices or not, but that doesn't mean she will feel pressure from us to do something we want her to. I know that Praveen and I will do our best to guide her, and whatever decisions she may make in the future, we will support her. We just want her to be happy," says Géraldine.

As for what the immediate future holds for Géraldine, Praveen and Leonie, Géraldine says, "I still don't know what to expect because everyday there's always something new with Leonie. My life has changed in every way. My social life now means play dates and kiddie parties. I now spend most of my time at home. While it is different from our frequent nights out, nothing will ever be able to take away this precious time I spend with my daughter. The love we share is worth all the compromises I make for her," says Géraldine. ■



progress. That made me determined to pull through for the sake of my baby. When the doctor told me that I was almost there and that my baby had black hair, I felt some kind of hope and this news helped me with the final push. And then that was it! She was out and all the pain which I experienced before had completely disappeared. I asked for her to be brought to me immediately for skin-to-skin contact. Through my tears and tiredness, I could only see her hair, but I could feel the love instantly!" We were discharged from the hospital quite quickly, and we finally got to bring our baby girl home. And that's when the real challenge began.

CHANGE IS INEVITABLE

Whether you like it or not, and no matter how idealistic you may be, a baby changes you. The life you're used to before a baby comes into it, is forever altered. When at first, everything is about you and your partner, soon

everything will be about that delicate life you hold in your arms. "Having Leonie was a life changing experience. Nothing was the same after she arrived. I didn't get any time for myself, I was always exhausted, I barely even had time to eat or shower. But I loved every minute of it. Nothing else mattered when I looked at my beautiful baby girl," she says.

However, the first month was a little difficult for Géraldine. She experienced mood swings and found herself crying for the first month. Even nursing was a little painful and stressful. Praveen noticed that she found it a little difficult to cope and had wanted his mother to move in with them, to help with the baby. However, the fiercely-independent Géraldine insisted on doing things on her own. "This disagreement did cause a bit of tension around the house but I was adamant. I'm a specialised baby photographer so I knew how to handle my baby. Praveen

