

## 'My holiday romance has never ended'

Reeling from a painful divorce, Sarah Williams, 38, went abroad to work and find a new direction. But she found much more than she expected...

Two years ago I needed to change my life. I'd recently divorced and felt like I was back at square one - I had no partner, no children and no home. I signed up to a course called Restored Lives, which helps people to recover after a marriage has broken down, and what I learnt helped me to let go of my pain and anger. I began to see that even though the future I'd planned had been taken away from me, in its place I'd been given the freedom to do something extraordinary.

When I learnt that a friend was working in South Sudan on a project organising health provision, I realised this could be the incredible experience I was looking for. I was certain the skills from my job as a social worker could help and the project organisers agreed. I handed in my notice at work, packed my life up and put it in storage. It was daunting, but I had the feeling that being a bit scared was just what I needed.

In June 2012 I landed in the capital, Dubai, and I felt about as far away from my old life in the UK as it was possible to be. I made friends with my new colleagues, sharing rice and beans in the shade while watching a big monkey strolling around. I flew out to the bush in little one-engine planes, touching down on mud airstrips where chickens and goats would run up, and the children in the village would come out to meet us. I joined in at the village jamboree, singing and dancing until dusk. I'd felt so lonely in my marriage, but now that I was alone, I felt strangely connected to everyone around me, self-sufficient and with confidence to talk to strangers.

That August I decided to travel down to South Africa on a group tour. At Cape Point, the southern-most tip of Africa, I stood on the craggy cliff and inhaled the views and all the possibilities that came with this

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incredible trip. There was a man in the group I felt a special connection with: Hugo. We'd sit next to each other on the bus and at dinner, and stay up chatting, sharing a bottle of wine and enjoying the magic of a warm Summer evening. I was drawn to him, fascinated by what he had to say about history and politics, and I knew my new-found independence and openness was attracting him, too. I felt like a butterfly coming out of my chrysalis.

We swapped email addresses at the end

of our trip, and I flew back to South Sudan and Hugo to his home in London, but we wrote to each other often. When I moved back to the UK in December, we went on our first date, to the ballet at Covent Garden. Seeing him again was electric. Soon we began a relationship and fell in love. Now I know Hugo is my best friend, the man I will spend the rest of my life with. We're getting married on Midsummer's Day. Our love began during that enchanted African Summer, and it feels right to be embarking on our new adventure together, with the sunshine warming us from the inside out.

'I felt like a butterfly coming out of my chrysalis,' says Sarah Williams

