

A bride, a groom, a belly dancer

Margate native Soraya El-Khouby has performed belly dances at weddings all over the world

BY DAVE ENSCOE



There are so many things to consider when planning a wedding: the invitations, the gown, the flowers, the menu, the belly dancer. The belly dancer? OK, not every couple wants a belly dancer at their reception, but for those who do, Soraya El-Khouby is ready, willing and more than able. She's been practicing the ancient art of belly dancing since she was 4 years old. She's performed at Atlantic City casino nightclubs since she was a teenager and her unusual talent has taken her all over the world, including Casablanca, where she danced for the King of Morocco.

Over the years she has also performed at hundreds of weddings.

"I focus on Egyptian, Lebanese and Moroccan weddings," Soraya says. "They're usually at casinos and banquet halls. I've done weddings at the Ram's Head Inn and hotels in Philadelphia, Cherry Hill."

While Soraya is of Syrian descent, she had a fairly typical South Jersey upbringing. She grew up in Margate, graduated from Atlantic City High School and earned a degree in cultural anthropology and sociology at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. She's been married for seven years to a doctor who, she says, is very supportive of her career.

But belly dancing was always her first love. Shortly after she finished college she formed her own company, Soraya's Mid-East Dance and Music Productions, which provides entertainment for casino events and banquets as well as weddings.

"I have a lot of personal and professional expertise in creating upscale party and exotic wedding receptions whenever Arabian nights entertainment or event design is needed," says Soraya, who is also a vocalist who sings in English and Arabic. "I provide bands and DJs who play trance



(1) Soraya poses with the bride at an Egyptian wedding, (2) performs a belly dance during a Lebanese wedding and (3) dances with the flower girl at the same wedding. "My belly dancing show is so family friendly that I brought a little girl into the act and showed her a few moves to the delight of the audience," she says.

and techno as well as traditional Arabic songs and pop music, which is very popular in Egypt now.

"If decor is needed, I can create the look of the ancient Egyptian pyramids amid the misty Nile with the exotic feeling to truly transport my clients and their guests into a realm of a gorgeous, unforgettable "Arabian Night" full of history, mystery, magic,

folklore and culture. I also work with Middle Eastern caterers."


For her performances Soraya wears authentic garb that she designs herself and has custom made in Egypt.

"I have a lot of beading, coins, flowing fabrics and sequins," she says.

A self-taught belly dancer, Soraya says her dancing is a

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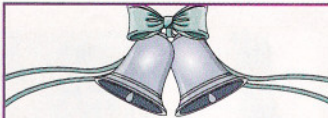
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- Soraya

combination of traditional folk and belly dancing of the Middle East and other parts of the Mediterranean such as Egypt and Morocco.

"I take my favorite parts and give it a modern flair while never debasing the true artistic vibe," she says.

Soraya says most of her weddings include a ceremony known as Zaffa, an ancient wedding march performed to an Egyptian drum rhythm.

"I perform Zaffa before the event begins to announce the bride and groom and wedding party to the guests," she says. "It's a ritualistic Egyptian tradition that is also used by the Lebanese and Moroccans, whether they're Muslim, Christian or Jewish. It's a non religious celebration of the bride and groom."

Later in the evening, Soraya will perform a more traditional belly dance.

"I always try to be conservative at weddings," she says. My costumes are less revealing. The brides like it because it's very family oriented."

While many of Soraya's wedding performances are

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Middle Eastern or Mediterranean themed, she occasionally dances at traditional American style ceremonies.

"My shows are perfect for people of all ages and ethnicities," she says. "A lot of the weddings are mixed marriages with two sides of the family from different religious denominations. There will be a Middle Eastern side and an Irish side. And most of the people on the Irish side will be seeing belly dancing for the first time."

Soraya is also committed to erasing stereotypes about belly dancing.

"Belly dancing is very misunderstood," she says. "Sometimes people think it's like stripping. It is not. It's an ancient, cultural art form, and I will never turn it into something it's not. I try not to Westernize my work or take it

out of context, which can turn the belly dancing into a disjointed circus side show or in bad taste. It's not going to be done in a way that might upset grandma."

For more information on Soraya visit bellydancebysoraya.com, youtube.com/NJBellyDanceEvents or twitter.com/SorayaAgency



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