

FROM LISDOONVARNA

WITH *love*

*Inspired by Ireland
to help others find love*

When South African widow Marleze Nolan made the 13,000km trip to Lisdoonvarna last year, she was like thousands of others looking for love at the village's annual matchmaking festival. What she didn't expect was that the trip to the west of Ireland would be the start of a life changing journey. Now the 47-year-old is organising her own matchmaking festival in Johannesburg in March and is also planning to relocate to Ireland within the next year.

"I heard about the Lisdoonvarna matchmaking festival from an Irish couple who stayed at my guesthouse in South Africa last year. They told me about the non-stop music and dancing sessions and the famous matchmaker Willie Daly and I was immediately hooked," she says.

"I have always felt a strong connection with Ireland, especially as my maiden name, Nolan, is Irish. I have visited the country twice in the past couple of years and it really felt like home.

"In South Africa, it is difficult to meet people, we don't have gatherings or dances for the over-40s, these are mainly for young people. So to hear about a mass singles event for all age groups was very exciting."

After looking online and finding more about the event, Marleze booked her ticket and arrived in Lisdoonvarna along with her adult son for the first weekend of the festival.

"I didn't really know what to expect, but when I arrived the village was buzzing. Country music star Mike Denver was headlining and there were thousands of people, young and old, all mixing together having the most wonderful time. I spent

"In South Africa, it is difficult to meet people"

all night jiving with different partners. It was honestly one of the best nights of my life."

Marleze stayed in the area for the next month and enjoyed many days and nights in Lisdoonvarna. But it was only after her son left that she began her search for love in earnest. Her first port of call was matchmaker Willie Daly, whom she had previously contacted in South Africa.

"I met Willie at his farm just outside Lisdoonvarna and he immediately made me feel at ease. He has this amazing ability to give you hope, hope that there is someone special out there.

"He did 'match' me with a few men but unfortunately there was no spark. However, I didn't mind too much as I'd met a few guys myself at the festival and have a feeling that it won't be long before I find love," she added.

Marleze's husband was murdered following a robbery in Johannesburg in 2003. His body wasn't recovered for 11 days. This

By Julie Carr

Romantic real life

event, coupled with a series of violent hijackings and an assault on the beach, were one of the reasons for her search for a new life abroad.

When she returned to South Africa in October, Marleze, couldn't stop thinking about Lisdoonvarna and wondered whether a similar festival could work there. It was only after she received a very positive reaction from a friend who owned a safari lodge that she was

hopefully stay for the duration."

With the venue secured, Marleze's thoughts turned to how she was going to finance the event. She soon realised that the money she had set aside would not cover all the costs of hiring the venue, artists and promotion. It was then she remembered the conversation she had with her Irish guests Carla Taylor and Brian Brennan about Lisdoonvarna and decided to contact them to see if

have been incredibly helpful and I wanted to acknowledge the origins of the festival in the title."

Kicking off on March 9, the festival will last for ten days and include the St Patrick's Day event on the March 17. Highlights of the event include a 'Harvest Moon dance' on the opening weekend, followed by singles' ice breaking activities and dance

at the event.

"I am very excited about going to this event. I think it's extraordinary what Marleze is doing. I admire her energy in getting this off the ground.

"I know that people in South Africa would not have the same freedom as we do in Ireland. But I think this festival there will be a



Willie Daly



South Africa



Marleze Nolan

"I came to Ireland looking for love"

convinced it was worth trying.

"My friend was really enthusiastic about my idea. He said straightaway 'Bring it here.' It was really after that conversation that everything started to fall into place."

Securing the location was key and with the Royal Gecko Bushveld lodge only an hour's drive from Johannesburg it ticked all the right boxes.

"It's an incredibly beautiful location. It is a 60-hectare bushveld farm, with wild deer, zebra and buffalo on the grounds. In terms of location, it couldn't be more different from Lisdoonvarna!"

The lodge has multiple dance areas, self-catering accommodation and camping facilities, with enough space to cater for over 5,000 people.

"It's an ideal location for a matchmaking festival as all the facilities are in one place and once people come here they will

they would be interested in getting involved.

Not only were they interested in helping but they suggested forming a partnership with their Carlow based drinks company 'An Sean-Teach'.

"This was brilliant news for me and a clear recognition that the festival had potential. Carla and Brian had already started to export their brands to South Africa, so it made good business sense for them to get involved."

Together they choose the name of the festival, "LisdoonAfrica Irish Country and Matchmaking festival" to ensure there was a clear link between the two festivals and countries.

"This was very important to me, as the organisers of Lisdoonvarna

lessons in both the Bushveld Lodge and in nearby bars and venues in Johannesburg.

Like Lisdoonvarna, music will play a huge part in the festival, with bands from both countries, playing at the festival.

"We want to combine the Irish and South African cultures together through music, dancing and food. There is a great tradition of 'Boeremusiek' [traditional music] in South Africa which is very similar to the country music played in Lisdoonvarna.

"It was brought in by the Europeans many years ago and is still played today."

As well as traditional South African bands, Marleze has booked a number of Irish country music bands to perform at the festival. The target age group for the festival is 40 and up, "It's hard for people to meet these days and safety is an issue here, it's a lot harder than it used to be years ago," Marleze said.

To help things along, she's invited matchmaker Willie Daly to provide matchmaking services

great opportunity for people to meet and fall in love," he commented.

Since initial details about the event were announced in November, there has been a huge buzz about the festival, both in South Africa and in Ireland.

"My initial plan was to give South Africans a taste of the magic of Lisdoonvarna, but I never envisaged that there would be so much interest from Irish people who want to come here as well. The event has really snowballed into something much bigger than I ever imagined."

As well as organising the event, Marleze has been busy finalising her plans to relocate to Ireland in 2018. In December, she travelled back for business meetings about the festival as well as looking for work and a permanent home.

"I came to Ireland looking for love, but what I found was so much more. I fell in love with the people, the landscape and now Ireland really feels like a second home," she says. **WW**

See www.facebook.com/lisdoonafrika/ for details