

# RAY OF LIGHT

When Sabrina Dhowre married actor Idris Elba, she was swept into the spotlight. While on a recent sojourn Down Under, we spent an afternoon with the big-hearted Canadian beauty whose ambition it is to make the world a better place. By Amy Campbell. Styled by Philippa Moroney. Photographed by Saskia Wilson.

In a 2017 interview with American magazine *Essence*, Idris Elba broke the hearts of eligible bachelorettes everywhere by saying he wouldn't get married again.

"Marriage is an institution of sorts. And I've done it. It's not for everybody. It's not my life's calling," acknowledged the British actor, DJ and *People* magazine's 2018 Sexiest Man Alive. But then images began to surface of Elba spending time with a stunning Canadian woman he'd met in Vancouver while filming *The Mountain Between Us*. The questions soon followed: Who is she? And will she change the actor's mind about marriage?

In February 2018, Elba popped the question. He and Sabrina Dhowre, the beautiful Canadian, were engaged to get married in Morocco the following year. "In many ways theirs is an old-fashioned love story," wrote the couple's close friend and editor-in-chief of British *Vogue* Edward Enninful of the wedding he put on the cover in July 2019. It's a daunting prospect to live up to in this day and age, not least in the public eye. But Dhowre, who's not lost her post-wedding glow (and probably never will), trusts in love.

"I met this amazing man who just kind of tornadoed my life," says the 32-year-old. "It was like, without a question I want to be with this person."

At the time of her *Vogue* shoot, Dhowre had been living in Sydney for close to five months. She was here not just for her husband's casting (Elba was in town filming *Three Thousand Years of Longing*, a fantasy-romance-drama he stars in alongside Tilda Swinton), but for her own work, too. "I'm a huge fan of [the film's director] George Miller. So I actually auditioned for a small role in the →



Sabrina Dhowre Elba wears a Boss dress, \$849. Bulgari earrings, \$18,700, \$10,250, and \$2,700. On right hand: Bulgari rings, \$6,900, \$11,600, and \$15,000. On left hand: Bulgari ring, \$19,100. Her own ear cuff, worn throughout. All prices approximate; details at [Vogue.com.au/WTB](https://www.vogue.com.au/WTB).

Louis Vuitton coat  
and pants, both  
P.O.A. Albus Lumen  
bikini top, \$490,  
sold as set. Bulgari  
earrings, \$18,700,  
\$10,250, and  
\$2,700.



Christian Dior dress,  
\$45,000, bra, and  
briefs, all P.O.A.  
Bulgari earrings,  
\$18,700, and \$2,700,  
and rings, \$6,900, and  
\$11,600. Her own  
Cartier bracelets.

SASKIA WILSON



Celine dress, \$5,100.  
Bulgari earrings,  
\$18,700, \$10,250,  
and \$2,700.

SASKIA WILSON



Bottega Veneta dress,  
P.O.A. Bulgari  
earrings, \$18,700,  
\$10,250, and \$2,700,  
and necklace,  
\$29,300. Her own  
Cartier bracelets.

film and got it," says Dhowre with a chuckle. "George had no idea I was Idris's wife at the time. But I love acting, I did a little bit of it back in Vancouver. I feel like it's a side of myself I want to start exploring more."

When Dhowre met Elba, she had just finished a philosophy degree and was preparing to do the entrance exam for law school. The daughter of Somali immigrants, she grew up in Montreal, and is the second eldest of six kids. Her parents split up and after a stepfather turned abusive, Dhowre moved to Vancouver with her mother around the age of 12.

"We lived in halfway homes and shelters when we moved to the West Coast," she shares. "When I tell people, their reaction is usually: 'I'm so sorry you went through that.' But the houses were these great places where the women bonded together, I made so many new friends ... it was a really great experience."

Dhowre was a painfully shy teenager. "Being a tall girl, you don't want to stand out too much. I used to slump a lot because of it." Participating in high school debating competitions and later beauty pageants helped her to gain self-confidence. She was even crowned Miss Vancouver in 2014. Today, she's a big advocate for body positivity and natural beauty. "I should've been born Italian. I'm like the biggest carb person ever," she says, laughing.

Being raised by a strong, single-minded mother clearly had a positive influence on Dhowre. She tells of how her mum, who moved to Canada from Somalia when she was just 19, would travel back to the continent to help women in the village she grew up in. When Dhowre and Elba became UN Goodwill Ambassadors for the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), it was on her mother's advice.

"Agriculture isn't necessarily a sexy topic. It's not something that is buzzy or anything. But my mum was the one who was like, 'this is really important,'" says Dhowre.

"Sustainable agriculture is going to be the way of the future and it's going to help combat climate change. When the pandemic hit, the first thing we all did was go to the grocery store and stock up on food. Food systems are so important to our survival but at the same time, these systems are really taken for granted."

Dhowre's passion and empathy is so infectious, it begs the question whether she would have found her way to IFAD or a similar philanthropic venture regardless of whether she'd married a movie star. When the conversation shifts to her desire to help evolve the conventional structure of humanitarian aid, she becomes especially animated.

"The face of Africa needs to change. Those ads you see are designed to make you pity Africans, whereas Africans are some of

the hardest working people I've ever met. They're not just looking for handouts. They're willing to do whatever work is required to implement better education and systems that will help to support their families."

She clarifies that she's not saying donations aren't needed. But greater transparency around *where* donations are going, and who they're benefiting, is. "I think we need to ask ourselves: are we just putting a Band-Aid on these issues by putting aid out, or are we actually trying to fix these problems?"

Dhowre says that working with IFAD has helped her find a new sense of purpose after the journey she was on became so radically disrupted by love. "I definitely went through a phase of, 'what do I want to do?' she says. "I've been able to find fulfilment through the work I'm doing with communities now. Helping other people has also led to opening conversations within myself, looking introspectively and dealing with my own issues."

While the pandemic has made working on the ground impossible, Dhowre has taken the opportunity to speak out more on social media, spreading awareness of causes she cares about among her 317k Instagram followers.

"I feel like it's a major responsibility. When you have a voice, you can't just squander it on pictures of food and shoes," she says with a smile, adding: "Okay, there's plenty of that too – I love shoes! But it's important to me that I also talk about things I care about."

Since arriving in Australia, Dhowre's Instagram feed has felt like a balanced curation of the things that matter to her most: fashion (she's a big fan of Australian labels Camilla and Marc, Zimmermann and Michael Lo Sordo), activism and philanthropy (she did some work with local food rescue organisation OzHarvest while here), and, yes, her husband.

Australia has felt like an adopted home for the pair, and they enjoyed the relative anonymity and lack of Covid they experienced during their stay. Though she and Elba still can't work out why wombats are called, well, *wombats*. "They're not bats!" she says, laughing. "I was so shocked."

While they were sad to leave Sydney at the end of March, Dhowre has plenty to look forward to including an anime series she is executive producing with Elba for American streaming platform Crunchyroll. "I've always been such a huge fan of anime!" exclaims Dhowre excitedly. "And to be able to create Black anime characters – how cool is that?"

Also on the cards: children of her own. "I'm still evolving," she says. "But it feels nice to sit here and reflect, because I have grown so much over the last five years. And I'm excited to continue letting myself evolve." ■

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Chanel necklace, \$5,310, and vest, \$7,760, from the Chanel boutiques.

Curl specialist: Rumbie Mutsiwa, Rumbie & Co  
Make-up: Gillian Campbell

SASKIA WILSON