

UK vs SA birth

Giving birth in England or in South Africa, which is better? Charlotte Duggan did both and tells the tale...



Hamish was born in London, England



“WITH SO MUCH SAID ABOUT

better care and natural birthing in the UK, compared to the high c-section rates and poor hospital care here in South Africa, we decided to find out what it is really like. Charlotte Duggan’s first child Hamish was born in London, England and 19 months later, she gave birth to Arabella in the heart of Jozi: Sandton.

MY LONDON BABY

In my first pregnancy I never saw the same midwife and not one midwife palpitated me – feel how the baby was lying. I spent the pregnancy clutching my own medical file full of unreadable, handwritten notes (which I photocopied obsessively in case my file got lost along the way), waiting for posted letters informing me of appointments and test results – most of which arrived after the allocated appointment date, worrying about all the horror stories I had heard about no midwives being available at the

weeks. I felt really uncomfortable and sleepless at about 3am, scared I was going to annoy Matt, my husband, I went down to the spare bed and had a ‘ding’ moment when I realised that I was finally in labour. Being the great wife I am, I let Matt sleep and even have his 5.20 am shower before I told him. He got all efficient and logged onto a website called contractionmaster.com to start timing the contractions – we got the most ridiculous graph from this program: my contractions were three minutes apart and then half an hour apart. He called the hospital and they abruptly told us to call back – not even come in – when they were four minutes apart. When contractionmaster.com finally told us that my contractions were five minutes apart, Matt convinced the hospital to let me come in. In the car the contractions came on quickly and were very intense – I was convinced I was going to give birth in the car. At the hospital we had to wait ten minutes for the lift, with children staring at me as I doubled over with each contraction – I was so embarrassed. Finally in the maternity section, a midwife gave me a paracetamol to ease the pain, which I promptly threw up. I was told that I had a long way to go and should go for a walk. I then started to vomit in earnest and had a bout of diarrhoea to which our midwife’s flippant response was: “oh, don’t go for a walk dear, things are going quicker than I thought, these are the signs of the second stage of labour”. There was

“So by the time we took the hospital tour where a brand new mother shuffled past us in a filthy blood-stained hospital gown, I was terrified”

birth, or needing to take your own bucket and cleaning equipment to the hospital with you – and this was all at one of the most exclusive hospitals in London. So by the time we took the hospital tour where a brand new mother shuffled past us in a filthy bloodstained hospital gown, I was terrified. I finally went into labour at 41

a birthing pool available, so I climbed into that and the relief was immediate. We were told not to expect a midwife to be with you all the time, but because I was heading for a waterbirth – which were rare in this hospital – we had the most senior midwife with us, plus a junior midwife to train. I also had gas and air (entonox) which I became fixated on and soon felt high as a kite.

Then I hit a wall. I asked for an epidural and was told that it would take five hours for the anaesthetist to come. Just the thought of being in this pain for another five hours kicked me into gear to get the baby out and I started pushing. Hamish was born into the water, placed on my chest and his cord was cut. I was still ‘off my face’ from the gas and air but felt amazing. So, I was horrified when I was put on a bed and told to push again – again! Delivering the placenta was so much worse than delivering Hamish but just as I thought: “I can’t do this”, the placenta came out.

The hospital doesn’t supply a thing, so Matt went down to get nappies and suddenly I was left totally alone. It was 10.30 at night, I had not eaten or drunk anything for 24 hours and I was exhausted. I was finally moved to the ward at 1.45 am and Matt was sent home. I had Hamish on my chest, I could not reach the cot and I still had not even had so much as a cup of tea. I started to go into meltdown, I began to shake, I was terrified I would drop the baby. I was not prepared for how stressed and awful I would feel, and I still had not breastfed Hamish. At 6am, after not a wink of sleep, a midwife came in and said “Oh dear, struggling already? This is a bit of a disaster” and then walked away. Finally another midwife helped me feed Hamish but she was very rough with me. I got up and realised I was bleeding, so went to the bathroom. The bin there was overflowing with other ladies’ blood sodden sanitary towels – it was disgusting. Matt arrived back, I was asked if I had done a wee and then told we could see the paediatrician then leave. I had been in the ward for the minimum 6-hour legal requirement. So with a car seat check, we were sent home.



Arabella was born in the heart of Jozi, South Africa



VS

MY JOZI BABY

When I found out that I was pregnant again, we were just about to sign the contract to move to South Africa – a country I had never been to before. We decided to do the first set of appointments and tests privately – although it cost a fortune – as I wanted to have proper medical notes to take with me and not the scribbled, unreadable ones that I had before. All went well, I had my 12 and 20 week scans with a private OB/GYN, and at six months pregnant, with a 15 month toddler in arms, we moved country. I booked an appointment with a private South African gynae a month before we left – we had heard that you just simply don’t go to government hospitals. I had also heard that so many women are pushed into c-sections and that the rate was 70 percent. So literally the first thing I said to the gynae was: “Hello, I don’t want to have a c-section.” His response was, “I can do what you want me to, most women here choose to have an elective c-section as they are quick, easy, efficient with no tearing, or incontinence. You are having a healthy pregnancy at the moment, so I see no reason for a c-section.” He gave me the impression that c-sections were better for women, but that he was happy to do either. The rest of the pregnancy went well, apart from lower back pain

and the fact that the baby was lying really low in my pelvis. I was really comforted by the fact that we had a scan at every appointment, and because the baby was so low, he did an internal check and lots of palpitation at every appointment from about seven months.

We went in for our 38 week appointment on a Friday and he told me that the baby would come soon and to come again on Tuesday. A friend told me to pack the hospital bag and make sure I took it with me because this doctor is called the ‘man with the golden finger’ for a good reason, but I scoffed at this thinking he is a doctor not a magician. At the appointment he gave me quite an aggressive internal exam and announced: “everything is ready, the baby will be here by this afternoon. Go check into the labour ward, then go for a cup of tea”. We were shocked: “What? Am I in labour?” Matt kept asking, “You mean now? today?” We were quite panicked, I think. I did not feel like I was in labour. In the canteen the waitress asked when I was due, I laughed (slightly manically) and said: “Now, I am in labour, now”. Then everyone started making a fuss, cheering, and we called to get a friend to look after Hamish, even a stranger came up to me to tell me how excited she was for me... >

real life

and after half an hour it suddenly hit me. I began to shake uncontrollably and felt so sick. I was suddenly very tight, uncomfortable and in pain. I felt like this labour was out of my control, like it was happening to me. In the labour ward, I fell immediately in love with the midwife, Betsy, who got me into a gown and gave me an enema. It was 9.45am only an hour after we saw the doctor. By 10am I was feeling really rough and started vomiting – I was not feeling like I was all there mentally and had absolutely no energy. I lay back on the bed and the pains became really intense and were very low down. But I was only one centimetre dilated. I was thinking, “I can’t do this, in the UK they would be sending me home, I have a whole day ahead of me in this pain, I just can’t do it”. At this point the doctor broke my waters and this brought on a wave of emotion. The enormity of what we had just done – moving to a foreign country, pregnant, with a toddler – hit me. I started to panic again and wasn’t breathing properly. I needed some help, so I asked for an epidural (I even asked Matt’s permission as the stigma of getting an

epidural in the UK is so high). Even with the epidural the pain was still incredible – I thought ‘I am not getting my money’s worth from this’ – but it did calm me down. I had been so clenched and tense, I was in shock as it was all happening so fast. Suddenly the midwife announced that I was already eight centimetres dilated in only 45 minutes. Ten minutes later, my doctor came in: ‘there’s the head’ and two pushes later: “here is your baby girl!” and Arabella was placed skin-to-skin on my chest. It was 11.20am – I had first seen the doctor in his office at 8.30am. I barely even noticed delivering the placenta and all I could think about was getting some food. Being in this hospital was amazing (especially compared to our UK experience). The nurse sponge bathed me and brought me the most beautiful tomato and cheese sandwich. I admit I was quite detached from the fact that I had just had a baby girl as I was intent on hunting out some more food and was equally excited about the amazing choice of food on the menu. I stayed a blissful two nights at the hospital, getting tea in bed, help with latching and feeding Arabella, given pain

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medication and nurses who stood by me to make sure I did not fall over after the epidural, as I took my first shower – so although the actual birth felt much more traumatic than Hamish’s birth because it was so fast and I was so stressed, having Arabella in a South African hospital meant I felt so much more cared for, comfortable and welcome. YP

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