

How I fled the suburbs for the hills of Tuscany

More and more of us dream of escaping the rat race – last week it emerged 34,000 people had applied for a single job on an Australian island. Here **Amanda Hyzler** describes what taking the plunge is really like, and four other life-shifters describe their experiences

We are both in our early 40s and so, I suppose, this should be seen as a mid-life crisis of sorts. Call it a kind of last-ditch attempt to do something different and to have a go on our own.

Before the move to Italy we lived a relatively comfortable, relatively middle-class life in Kingston upon Thames. I had worked in Bloomsbury for a posh picture framers before giving up work to look after our girls (now seven and nine). Julian had happily taught art for the last 14 years and before that was a freelance illustrator and photographer. We met in our early 20s and have been together ever since. Italy has always been part of our life. It was our first holiday destination and it's a great place to fall in love.

We survived our first trip to Italy on a student's budget, living on bread, cheese and cheap red wine so that we could afford a room in a crumbling villa with stucco walls the colour of old roses. It had expansive (and expensive) views over terraces of vines and olives, and up towards the ancient town of Montepulciano.

A few years later (with a bit more money and a car) we returned, this time to photograph the extraordinary lunar landscape of the Crete Senese, just south of Siena. Each abandoned farm we passed began to seem like an opportunity.

After every holiday it got harder and harder to settle back to life in England. When Julian started taking groups of students on art and art history trips to Florence, Rome and Venice we began to think up fantastical plans for moving to Italy. We dreamt of starting our own business running holidays, with painting and photography workshops and art history tours. It was something we liked to talk about as we savoured the last of the rough red wine we had hauled back home with us, but I doubt whether either of us believed it would happen.

Then, within a few years of each other, my father and both of Julian's parents (all of whom were only in their 60s) died, and life began to seem quite short. The loss of parents so unexpectedly was heart-breaking. It seemed that things would not be as we had expected and a different kind of future was unfolding.

During this time we talked about the choices we make, the different paths our lives could take and, of course, we talked about Italy. In the end, we talked about it so much that we knew we either had to make the move or shut up forever and stop boring our friends.

It took us about three years to find the right property that we could turn into a home for ourselves, but which also had the potential for creating apartments and an art studio. It had to meet so many requirements: the right size, good views, the right location and, most importantly, the right price. When we found it we knew immediately that it was "the one". That's when it got serious: selling the house in Kingston, Julian handing in his notice,

FROM I.T. MANAGER TO WHALE WATCHER



NIC SLOCUM
"I was a keen yachtsman and had often sailed to Ireland and so knew that there were plenty of cetaceans around the coast of West Cork."

"It wasn't particularly difficult to make the swap – I used to catch a train at 6am every day and wouldn't get home until 8pm. My wife was just as keen as me – we both wanted a better quality of life for our children and to be involved in a process that brought the conservation message to a lot of people. Taking people out to see animals in the wild was, for me, the ideal way.

"We did our homework, then moved to Castlehaven in 2003. The tourist season here is quite short and you have to earn enough to last you through the winter months. You also have to realise that your earnings will fluctuate and downturns will affect people and their willingness to travel and spend money. However, the sheer number of people that started to come out whale watching with us in the first season surprised me.

"We'd run our own business before so knew the technicalities. We are bringing lots of business to local B&Bs, which also helps us fit in. Local fishermen always tell me when they've seen whales or dolphins. I'm sure that they still think of us as that strange family up on the hill but we would never know it.

"The highs are wonderful. I can leave my car unlocked wherever I go, and we wake up to amazing views over the islands. We want to get another boat, expand the whale-watching business and set up a centre to study cetaceans."

■ 00 353 28 33357; whalewatchwestcork.com

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With all our eggs balanced precariously in one basket, we moved

preparing the children for the wrench of leaving everything they had ever known, and timing it (buying, selling and leaving), all on one crazy day. So, maybe foolishly, with all our eggs balanced precariously in one basket, we moved. It was the week before Christmas 2006.

We handed the keys of our Victorian semi to its new owners, we saw all our possessions begrudgingly crammed into a knackered removal van and, silently, watched them drive away.

Then we stuffed the car full of all the things they had left behind, plus the kids, the cat and the cash, and said all our good-

byes. We were really leaving England on our way to a new home and new life. I swallowed hard and looked out of the window at the cold and familiar English sky. It was almost dark and I could see the Christmas lights welcoming travellers to the Channel Tunnel. We had approximately 926 miles to go.

After a stressful journey with weeping adults, weeping children and back-to-back Disney cartoons, there followed a grim arrival in freezing fog and the nearest I've ever felt to a nervous breakdown. But, somehow, Santa came and went and at the beginning of January the children bravely started at their new Italian schools, and we started tackling the house.

It is an honest country farmhouse, solid and square, the arched loggia being its only real extravagance. Behind it is a dark and witchy wood, and all around golden, rolling fields and distant mountains, on the border of Tuscany and Umbria.

We soon realised that our budget was too tight and our original plans for the house too optimistic. If we were to make a go of the renovations we would have to have a drastic rethink and do a lot of the work ourselves. We had always known our finances would be tight – we'd watched hours of TV shows documenting the fate of other English couples abroad – but it was still a bit of a shock.

Another shock, but a less predictable one, was adjusting to living in the countryside. We had moved from Greater London to a part of rural Italy: beautiful, but wild and open, ruled by the seasons and by the weather. The routine of collecting, chopping and stacking wood (a novelty at first) soon became a priority for each winter's day. The wood-burning stoves all needed to be carefully lit and tendered, and every so often the house inexplicably filled up with smoke, so we started again, opening up the windows and wondering what we did wrong that time. It wasn't like "popping the heating on".

After months of nervously waiting for the permissions to build, we finally got started. Not on plan A or even plan B but a reduced and compromised plan C.



Almost two years on, I'm not sure which plan we're up to now. As far as building experience goes we were naive, hapless and helpless to start with but, guided by a small, hardworking team of local builders we have learned fast. We've had to.

It's one thing to have a dream, another to have the chance to achieve it, but

quite a different thing to sell that dream to other people. For us to be able to stay here, we need other people to want to come and stay here too, to want to join one of Julian's painting courses, or rent the apartments and, as we've only just started, that is easier said than done.

So, soon after we arrived in Italy, we



Painter Julian Hyzler, above, and his wife Amanda will run art courses at their converted Tuscan farmhouse, left, after months of hard work by the couple, far left.

FROM DJ TO SKI LODGE BOSS



JASON SAVIDGE
"I came to Switzerland by accident. I didn't ski until I was 21 or snowboard before the age of 30 – I just fell into it. I'd Dled in Britain and around the world, then started to do it in Zurich. I soon realised that you got paid more DJing in the ski resorts so concentrated on them."

"After 10 years I was in a rut. It was an unhealthy atmosphere – in those days clubs and bars were full of smoke and the nocturnal existence was getting me down and I knew that I had to reinvent myself. I wasn't going to become an accountant, and there was logical progression to starting a skiing and snowboarding company; after all, more and more friends had been coming to stay with me each winter and I'd got to know all the resorts and the people."

"Financially, it was scary. As a foreigner I had to pay super tax, although I don't know as I'm a resident because I got married to a Swiss woman – for all the right reasons, I should add. For the first two seasons, it was like chucking money down a hole – including advertising and website development – but then *Snowboard UK* magazine came out and did an article and from there it snowballed with good word of mouth and it showed the local people that I was serious."

"The bureaucracy can be maddening, but that's part of Switzerland; they take safety and regulations very seriously. I would advise people to make sure they really know their subject and understand both the mentality and the language of the country they're moving to."

"It's easy to become blasé about the landscape when you live here, but I can't because I see it through my guests' eyes. These days I get up at 6.30 each morning to get the first lift up in the most beautiful surroundings. That's when I used to go to bed."

■ snowmotions.com

decided to start a blog. In the beginning it was a way of keeping in touch with friends and recording this dramatic change in our lives: lots of pictures of "work in progress", but it soon became much more important. We realised that we could show potential guests more than just a pile of rubble but give read-

FROM POLICEMAN TO B&B OWNER

DEREK POPE

"Moving to north Devon had been a dream for years. Both my wife Sue and I were in the Warwickshire police force and I was coming up to retirement – I'd joined at 16 as a cadet and had done nearly 30 years' service."

"We knew the area well, and when the Traveller's Rest came up for sale – it was a private house – we made an offer. I commuted to work for a year while we renovated it by redecorating the bedrooms and making sure that they complied with fire regulations."

"We took our time opening. Sue practised on friends and family before we started taking paying customers. There's no B&B sign, so we know who is going to turn up – most of our business comes from the internet and through the tourist board. You learn people skills in the police force and those have been useful – we like being on hand and giving advice. We host civil

ceremonies and cook some evening meals, but not all the time, because then you become a slave to the B&B.

"The revenue pays some of the household bills and gives us a nice holiday once a year – we don't pay ourselves a wage from it. It can be hard work but it's worthwhile when you read the comments people leave in the visitors' book."

■ travellersrestoldchurchdevon.co.uk

wrapped, piece by piece, but that's the way it is here, and we have to learn to relax and embrace it. We are trying to break out of a suburban comfort zone but, it seems this isn't just rusticity, it's Italian rusticity and, after all, it is great cheese.

Our daily routine starts with the morning rush hour. Now not sitting in traffic, but appreciating the flurry of loyal customers who join in the ritual of cappuccino, caffè latte, espresso or macchiato at the local bar. Schools here start early, so we too have time to indulge before tackling the day's tasks, which could be anything from working on the house or garden, to taking art history groups on day trips, marketing the website, writing the blog and generally getting things ready.

Then Italy closes at 1pm. Life stops for lunch for a couple of hours and there's no use trying to fight it, so we spend what's left of the day trying to catch up with the time we still feel we've lost. We're not old enough to want to slow down, but Italy is conspiring against us, trying to force us into siestas we don't feel we deserve yet.

The children have astonished us in their ability to accept and adapt to the changes we have thrown at them. The schoolteachers are like all Italians – they love children. It really is true.

It's hard to honestly say at this stage whether or not this has been the right move, but we do all know that we will probably never live anywhere as beautiful as this – even the kids realise that. We first heard them call it "home" last Christmas, after exactly a year here, chatting away to each other in the back of the car in Italian. For us it may well take a little longer, but we are trying.

And slowly, people are beginning to find us. Our first courses start soon – just enough time to squeeze in a couple more nervous breakdowns...

IF YOU LIKE THE SOUND OF THAT... PLOT YOUR ESCAPE

BUSINESSES FOR SALE GUEST HOUSE IN DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY, SCOTLAND

Set in six acres of gardens and woodlands, a 15-minute walk from the town of Beattock, Marchbankwood House (marchbankwood.co.uk) is run as a three-bedroom guest house and private home. It has a four-star rating with Visit Scotland. **The cost:** £569,000

PUB IN TIGNES, FRENCH ALPS

Vincents (vincentsbareu) is popular for its après-ski live music events. It has a professional kitchen currently serving pizzas, and there's also the possibility of opening the bar for the summer season. **The cost:** €275,000

BOAT EXCURSION BUSINESS IN CATALONIA, SPAIN

A great little business for anyone wishing to escape to the Costa Brava. Started four years ago, the company takes passengers on a 40-minute power boat ride along Tossa de Mar's beautiful coastline, exploring quiet coves and caves. **The cost:** €225,000

RESTAURANT IN AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

Established more than 30 years ago, Sopranos in Epsom, Auckland, specialises in Italian cuisine, and according to New Zealand's national *Cuisine Magazine* it has "possibly the most stunning interior in Auckland". **The cost:** NZ\$220,000 (£80,000)

SURF, SKI AND WAKEBOARD SCHOOL IN BRAUNTON, NORTH DEVON

Point Breaks (pointbreaks.com), near Croyde Bay offers surfing, waterskiing and wakeboard lessons, kayak tours and speedboat rides. The sale includes all equipment. **The cost:** £130,000

BEACH BAR IN ZANTE, GREECE

A beer mat's throw from the beach in Laganas on the south-west coast, this operates as a restaurant/bar in the day and watering hole in the evening. Upstairs you'll find two bedrooms with a shower room. **The cost:** €130,000

For more information on all of the above visit businessforsale.com

JOBS ABROAD CHEF ON A BARGE IN FRANCE

Love to cook? Head to Burgundy and work as a chef on a barge sleeping six to eight guests. You'll be responsible for three



A surf school in North Devon is up for sale for £130,000.

meals a day and running cookery weeks. **The salary:** £1,440 a month, plus accommodation, food and tips. Apply to Natives (020 8788 4271; natives.co.uk)

The contract: Six months from April

SNOWMOBILE GUIDE IN ICELAND

After training you'll be paid to take groups on snowmobile excursions on the magnificent Myrdalsjökull glacier, home of the famous volcano Katla. **The salary:** On application

The contract: Three months-plus (post available all year)

PILATES INSTRUCTOR IN MEXICO

Pez Pilates will be opening the first of a chain of Pilates studios in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, this month and is looking for a full- or part-time "enthusiastic and energetic" certified Pilates instructor. Knowledge of Spanish is an advantage. **The salary:** On application

The contract: Permanent, full- or part-time

SEA KAYAKING GUIDE IN CROATIA

Adria Avature in Dubrovnik needs someone with sea kayaking experience to help guide its tours along the Dalmatian coast and Elafiti islands. **The salary:** €40 a day, plus accommodation and meals during the tours

The contract: 4 May to 29 October

CHEF IN IBIZA

Enjoy a hot Spanish summer while working at the family-run Cantina Bar & Restaurant in Cala Llonga on the east coast of the island. **The salary:** From €1,000-1,200 a month (after tax) plus tips and accommodation close by

The contract: 1 May to 31 October

For more information on the four jobs above, visit jobsabroad.com

Nicola Iseard

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Hesaves the pips from every apple (each one, he tells me, is a possible tree) Harriet Green on living with a frugal husband

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