

Make for the mountains

Greg Taylor talks to a British family who made a successful move to the Pyrénées, where they now run a holiday business...

In last month's issue, I looked at the idea of making a fresh start in France – after all, when times get tight, it is tempting to try your luck elsewhere. This month, I've been talking to a plucky family of four who left the UK three years ago to set up home in Languedoc's Pyrénées – a brave and slightly unusual move, as this lofty location is not popular with many of our fellow countrymen, who typically prefer pretty, easily reached villages and small towns surrounded by vines, within a short drive of the coast. However, Ian and Angela Pendry were looking for a life change and a challenge: read on to find out how they achieved just that.

What prompted your move?

We lived in Derbyshire; I worked for a sports company and Angela had worked for several outdoor brands before taking time out to have children. Our relocation was prompted by two things: we had talked for many years about setting up a small hotel in a great location, and Angela was keen to do something interesting when our youngest child started school. So in 2006, we moved to Languedoc with Shawna aged four, and Ella aged six.

Where did you go, and why?

We live in St Pierre Dels Forcats, in the Pyrénées-Orientales département, near the ski resort of Font Romeu. We chose this area, after looking hard at the Alps and the whole Pyrenean chain, because it offered the perfect geography for our business idea (ski holidays in the winter, mountain-biking holidays in the summer). The mountains are high (up to 3,000 metres) but the valley we live in is more rounded than many, with an incredible path network, which is better for mountain biking, and we are part of the Neiges Catalanes ski area, with over 300km of slopes. The climate is amazing (lots of



sunshine!) and property prices were relatively low, as the area is largely undiscovered, plus there are three airports within easy reach.

Tell us about your French home

We bought a small, old, run-down hotel on the edge of the village but close to the ski slopes, with 10 bedrooms and a spacious apartment. It was the space and the bedrooms (already converted with en-suite bathrooms) that attracted us, although it still needed masses of renovation and redecoration; we've spent about €100,000 so far.

How do you earn your living?

We run summer and winter holidays from our hotel. We both studied Recreation, Leisure and Tourism at Sheffield University, and that, combined with our travelling experiences, gave us a clear idea of the kind of business we wanted to set up. UK customers are our main client base, topped up with local business here and there. By working hard with existing UK contacts, we have so far been successful in both summer and winter.

The work is incredibly rewarding but hard; apart from

is fantastic. We get to spend time with the kids out of season (at other times it can be a rush, but they have adapted really well), and we have made some good friends who are always happy to help if needed.

Angela arrived with no French, which meant things were very hard at first, and I had basic conversational French. There are very few English speakers in the area, so we had no choice but to immerse ourselves in the community and really work on our language skills. We now do the girls' homework with them, which helps us improve our French too!

Onward and upward or back to Blighty?

Running your own business is always a hard thing to do, and we find switching off difficult. However, our

an assistant mountain-bike guide for summer, we don't employ staff, to keep the costs down, although this may have to change. We work 16-hour days, and this includes all the housework, cooking, guiding (biking and skiing, for an average six hours a day), transfers and so on.

We make enough to live comfortably (just!) and invest all the profit back into the building for its development and upkeep. A good accountant is worth their weight in gold: we were recommended one who saves us an incredible amount of time and hassle.

What about quality of life?

There is great community support for children here, including kids clubs, and the girls love their new life; skiing in the winter and playing in the summer sun. Apart from the hours we work, which increase massively in season, the lifestyle

guests often ask us if we'd go back to a 'normal' job, and we always say "no way!"

The exchange rate hits us fairly hard, as our UK customers pay us in sterling and we then convert the money to euros. However, it's not feasible to put prices up in the current climate and we'd rather be busy than empty (empty beds make no money!).

Our bike customers are real enthusiasts, so we hope they will continue to come, despite the UK financial situation, and so far this winter, we are busier than ever. We'll have to see how things go, but if customers are more cautious about spending money, the Pyrénées are a good option – a holiday here is much cheaper than in the Alps! □

Ian and Angela can be contacted via www.altitudeadventure.com. To read more about relocating to Languedoc, visit the relocation page at www.creme-de-languedoc.com

