

Sun, souvenirs & new careers

Going on holiday is usually a time to switch off from work. But, as Cheryl Holden discovered, a vacation is often just the change you need to inspire a career brainwave. Meet the women who came home with more than just a tan. Photographs Polly Farquharson

THE GALLERY OWNER

Kirsty Smith, 34, is married to Ged, and lives in Manchester. She used to be a solicitor

The holiday that changed her life:

Travelling through France and Spain in 1998, where she fell in love with the small galleries which sold affordable art by local artists. Importing the idea back home, she and Ged used their savings to pay for a year's lease on a shop and now stock work by 250 artists from the north of England and Scotland.

Wish you were here? 'After six months, I was working part-time in my day job; after a year, I ran the gallery full-time. The only problem is stopping myself taking too much of the artwork home - I've had to come up with a "one in, one out" policy.'

A chance breakfast stop in an Andaluz roadside café, and suddenly we were no longer just holiday-makers. The local olive oil drizzled on toasted rolls seemed an unlikely delicacy, but once tried it couldn't be forgotten - and for us its mouthwatering flavours outstripped anything we'd bought back home. It was love at first bite. We'd never seen any Spanish oils in Britain, so why not bring back some to sell to local delicatessens ourselves?

My husband Jonathan and I were full-time journalists in our thirties, with a lot of questions about our professional futures. We wanted more control over our time. We wanted to spend more of it together. We wanted the option of a better income. And with two daughters in secondary school, moving towns for promotion wasn't on our agenda. But

until now, we'd been unable to find a way to get what we wanted.

We're not alone in that. Nor, says psychologist Professor Cary Cooper, are we alone in being inspired by our two weeks away from the daily grind to take a fresh look at our lives. Holidays, he says, provide exactly the right conditions for the seeds of an idea to grow. 'When you're relaxed and in reflective mode, you're much more open to ideas. When you're in the UK and living a frenetic life, you walk right past opportunities without even seeing them because you're so stressed out.'

The next summer we started turning our dream into a reality. Our friends in Spain were really supportive when they heard our

plans. The fact that they had nothing to do with olive oil production didn't stop them. They harnessed every contact they could muster, and during our next visit we were whisked around remote olive groves before we could say 'extra virgin'. By the time we flew home we had several interested producers, enough oil to shock the cabin crew, and little idea what to do next.

The first step to a successful cross-border business, says Dr Peter Hawkins, a careers expert at Liverpool University, is to have a big vision. The second is to ignore your doubts. We had the vision, but I wasn't keen on taking too big a risk. 'You have to ask yourself, "What's the biggest hurdle or barrier I face?"' says Peter Hawkins. 'In most women's cases, it's fear - which in fact is "false evidence appearing real". It's lack of confidence, or stereotypical views about what you can do and how to go about matters - and the exciting thing is it's all within your control. You can do anything you like about it.'

We rang the Inland Revenue, Customs and Excise, and everyone else we could think of for advice and information. We agreed a very small advance from the bank to cover our initial costs, and ordered 10 cases of oil. I reassured myself that we'd eat it anyway, so it would pay for itself if no one wanted it.

We were so green. Jonathan schmoozed his way into our first appointment with the buyer at an extremely smart deli. We

almost had to stuff handkerchiefs in our mouths to stop ourselves squealing with glee when she took a case on the spot. So far Jonathan's done most of the selling. My Spanish is better, so I deal with our Andalucian contacts.

We fit the business around everything else. Jonathan still works full-time as a journalist, and

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