

The big move pays off

To gain a better work-life balance, this couple relocated from London to a French village. It was a steep learning curve but they have no regrets.

By VANETHA GUNASEKARAM

LIVING in one of the world's major cities can be wearisome. The high cost of living, the fatigue of travelling for hours to work and back, busting a gut at work and getting very little quality time with your family and friends are only some of the many stresses. This was why Richard and Chitra Pullen felt that it was time to leave London.

The couple met in London in 1986 while Chitra – the daughter of the late Datuk V. Muthusamy, a prominent lawyer and politician and Datin Valli Muthusamy, a former Senator – was studying Law in Queen Mary's College. Richard was working in the UK Pensions industry.

The couple married in 1996. Both enjoyed successful careers and lived in a beautiful part of London. It was a great lifestyle but it was frenetic and they felt that they were too busy to maintain a good work/ life balance.

So, in 2003, they decided to up stick and take themselves and their young daughter, Lily then aged five, off to the south of France,

specifically the Languedoc region. Having holidayed in the area a number of times, and loving its many wonderful qualities – the laidback lifestyle; the delicious food; the great wine from the region, one of the world's largest; the blue skies, hot summers and mild winters; the beautiful beaches and countryside; the reasonably priced property market (as opposed to the more well-known Provence) – the Pullens didn't have to think too long about their new home.

In addition to the charm of the region, the deciding factor for the couple was Lily's education. France is renowned for its high standards of education; the fact that she would be learning another language was an attractive proposition. These considerations, along with Richard's fluency in French, made the move a done deal.

As one half of the couple is Malaysian with family here, they wanted to be able to travel back easily. The fact that the area is surrounded by four regional airports as well as two international airports – Toulouse and Barcelona – has allowed them to visit

Malaysia and London regularly.

As Chitra says, "I never got used to the grey skies and cold winters in Britain, despite having lived there for almost 20 years. This area of France is known to have 300 days of sunshine a year. The constant blue skies made a great change after London and of course, we wanted to be somewhere where we could travel back easily to Britain and Malaysia."

Initially, they ran a Chambre d'Hotes (Bed and Breakfast) in their beautiful huge house in Autignac, near the city of Beziers. During this time, both Richard and Chitra were creating strong bonds with the locals as well as the expat community who were either living or buying holiday homes in the area. They started dabbling in property development as friends were impressed with the work they had done to their house. Soon this industrious pair felt that real estate and property development were their true calling.

This is not to say that it was all plain-sailing. The family had a massive learning curve in terms of living in a village rather than a



Richard and Chitra Pullen outside their home in the south of France.

city. Chitra and Lily had to learn the language. In fact, Lily started school without knowing any French but she took it in her stride and is now at university in France.

In 2004, Chitra gave birth to their second child, Jude, who is now 14 years old.

Running a business in France can be tricky. As Chitra puts it, "The language is often a challenge for foreigners moving to France and perhaps one of the main impediments. Also, France has a very tough business environment and all professions are tightly regulated. Whilst that makes it harder to do business in France, in some ways it also makes it a safe country to do business in. The property market is one of the most solid in Europe and buying a property in France is very safe as the process is well-regulated."

So was it a good move 15 years ago?

Chitra enthuses, "Definitely! We are enjoying the good life in a far more relaxed environment. It is heartening for us to see our kids grow up as multilingual individuals and know that we have given them a great start to life. It has also been a fantastic experience starting a business from scratch, and Richard and I have learnt so much and continue to learn taking our business forward."

Richard reaffirms, "We see our future here. France has great medical and pension provisions for retirees so it will be good for our old age. The likelihood that our children will be with French partners is strong and we will want to stay close to them and their families. However, we will still want to go back to Malaysia – the ideal scenario, when we retire, would be to spend a quarter of the year in Malaysia."

Looks like taking a leap into the unknown to put their family first has paid off handsomely for the Pullens!

Once the decision to focus on real estate was made, Richard and Chitra moved to another lovely village called St Marcel sur Aude, which is very close to the Roman city of Narbonne on the Mediterranean coast and the famous Canal du Midi as featured in the British celebrity chef Rick Stein's *French Odyssey* series. Between motherhood, a new home and a burgeoning family, both Richard and Chitra started their real estate business.

Their previous careers stood them in good stead, as Chitra elaborates, "I was a Commercial Property lawyer in the city of London and as I had a Law degree, I had the required qualifications to apply for a French real estate licence, which is mandatory to open a real estate agency in France. My legal training in Britain helped me to understand the French legal conveyancing process, whilst quite different in procedure, is based on similar principles. It was also crucial that I could read and speak the language as it was important for documentation and business communication with the authorities and government bodies."

Richard adds, "In addition to owning my own Pension Consultancy in Britain which honed my sales skills, I was also previously a Housing Officer for a London borough. I have a second degree in Building and Property Management which means we are able to support our clients with building, renovation and property management advice as well. These are important considerations for our mainly foreign clientele."

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