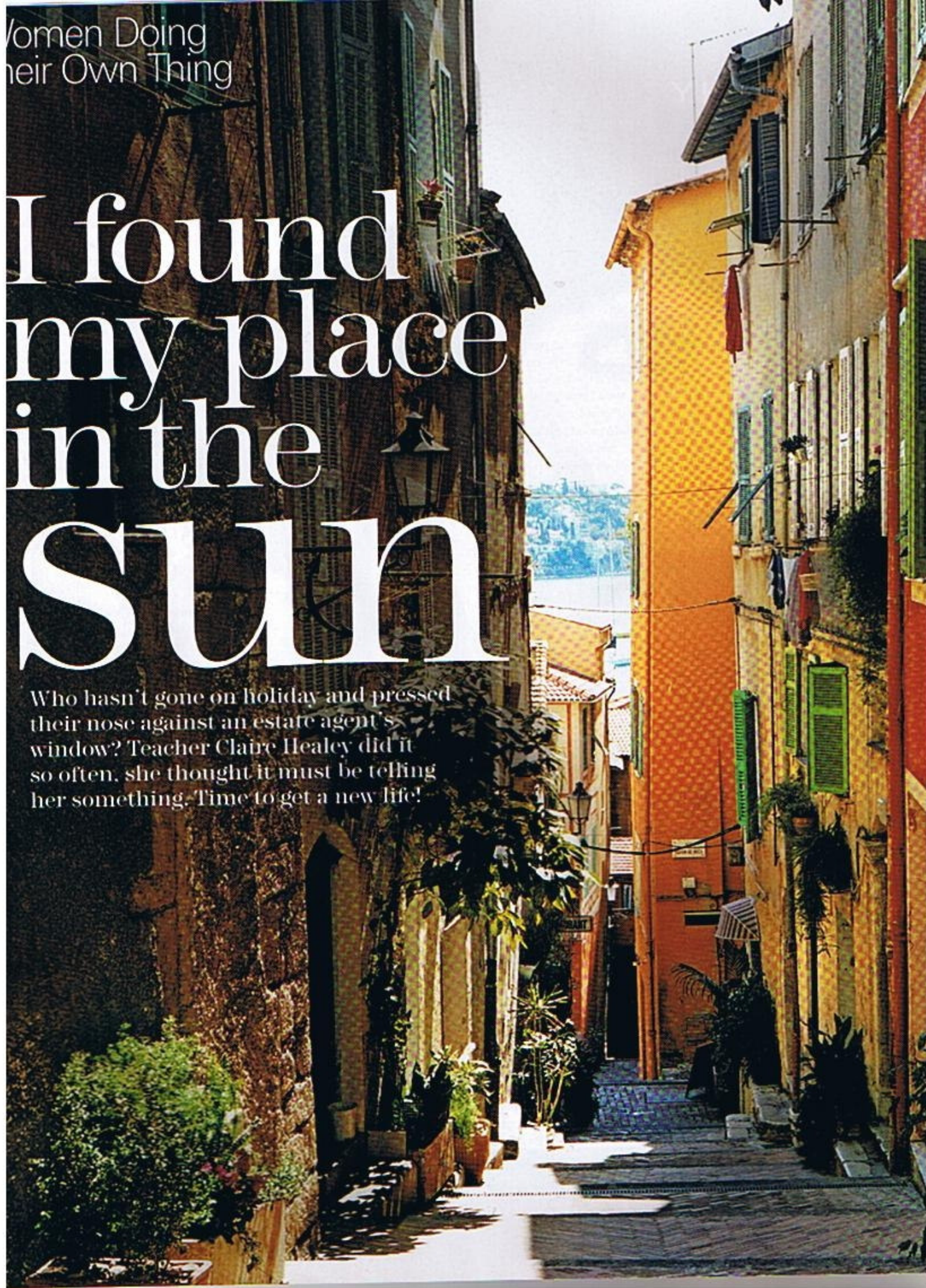


Women Doing
Their Own Thing

I found my place in the SUN

Who hasn't gone on holiday and pressed their nose against an estate agent's window? Teacher Claire Healey did it so often, she thought it must be telling her something. Time to get a new life!





Finding fabulous properties on the Riviera? Now there's a job worth smiling about...

You're wandering round a magical French hilltop village, dipping into cafés for a cooling citron pressé, mooching through lavender-scented gift shops... then you find yourself in front of an estate agent's window. It's only a matter of time before the cooing and pointing starts. 'Ooh, look at that romantic chateau... the swanky villa with its own wine cellar... the apartment for £70,000.' Cue the semi-serious bit of maths, where you work out what you could get if you traded in your life in the UK.

And that's about as far as it goes for most of us. But instead of drifting off to the next shop window, Claire Healy, 36, left her stressful teaching job in North London, moved to France and became the estate agent. As a property relocater, she now finds homes for Brits in search of a new life in the South of France. It's her job to show people round those million-euro villas with marble floors and palatial swimming pools, the untouched Languedoc farmhouses surrounded by vineyards, and the bargain holiday flats we all drool over.

You never know, next time it could be her window you're looking in...

What made you up sticks?

'The daily grind of teaching in a tough comprehensive was getting me down. I used to get that horrible Sunday-night feeling when you can't sleep, have a fluttery tummy and your mind turns over and over – but every night. The crunch came when I was teaching a class of 14-year-olds and one of them tried to stab another. No one was hurt, but it was the final straw. >

'I started taking anti-depressants, but knew I had to do something to change my life. While I was at university, I'd spent a year studying French on the Côte d'Azur. What had always kept me going was the thought that, one day, I could go back. So I jacked in my job and persuaded my boyfriend Neil to come with me. We rented out my flat, withdrew our savings and booked two one-way tickets, swapping everything we had for a tiny, bare, one-bedroom flat in Nice.'

Did you worry that you had no job to go to?

'We just wanted a simple, outdoor life - no mortgage, no stressful jobs. Our flat was halfway up a mountain and cost £250 a month. I got a job translating junk mail for half what I'd been earning in Britain. But I never imagined I'd become a successful property finder. Friends and family thought we were mad, and I felt guilty leaving my job, but something told me we were doing the right thing.'

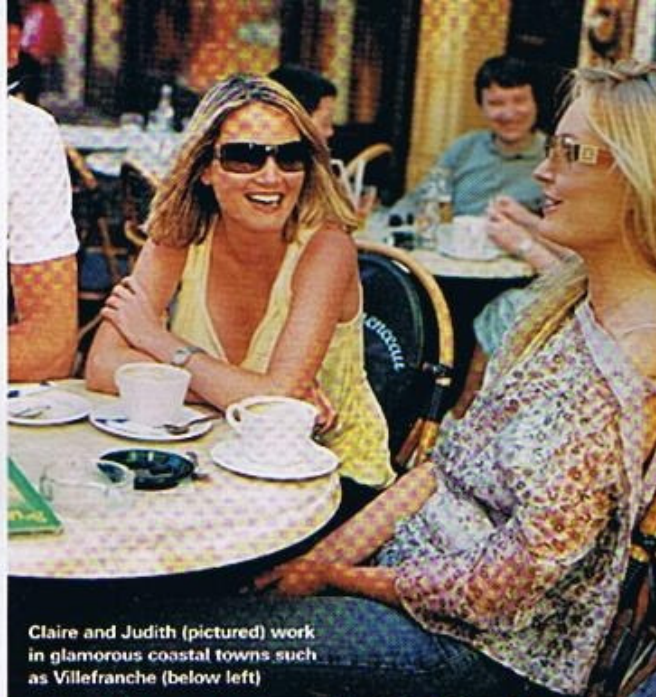
How did you hit on your business idea?

'One day at a party I met Judith, who's now my business partner. We were on the beach in St Jean Cap Ferrat, in front of some of the most expensive real estate in the world, and we started chatting about property. I'm always the rude person who noses around people's houses when I'm invited for dinner. Since arriving in France, I'd loved exploring the Riviera's old towns. Behind those scruffy front doors, you'd often glimpse fabulous mosaic courtyards leading to exquisite homes.'

'Judith was a property nut too. The business was just a crazy, back-of-a-cigarette-pack scribble at first, but it gradually began to look more and more sensible. Our plan was to specialise in tracking down homes for Brits who wanted a new life abroad. Clients would give us their property wish list and we'd arrange a viewing trip for them.'

How did you get your idea off the ground?

'First we discovered that the real-estate business in France is highly regulated. So to give ourselves the edge, we had to get an official licence. This



Claire and Judith (pictured) work in glamorous coastal towns such as Villefranche (below left)



'The business was a crazy back-of-a-cigarette-pack scribble that started to look quite sensible'

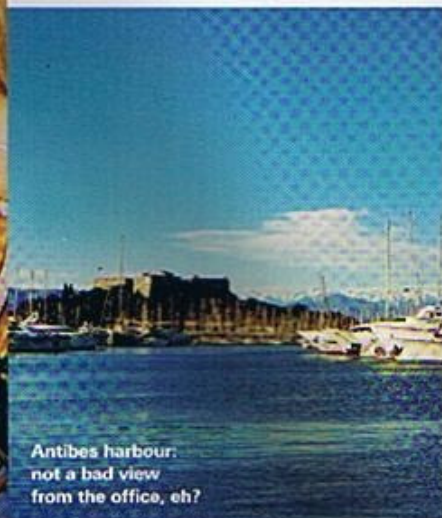
was a battle with the French authorities. French bureaucracy is famous for one good reason: it's a nightmare. Then we needed to buy computers, install phone lines and start advertising. We used our combined savings (about £4,500) to set up offices in both our homes. That was nearly three years ago, and this year we're opening a proper office. Finally things are really taking off.'

Describe your first day in business

'Like jumping in at the deep end. We'd bumped into a couple looking wistfully in an estate agent's window, got chatting and offered to find their dream home. We had to come up with 10 fantastic properties to show them (which involved stretching the truth a little with several estate agents: "Yes, we're experienced property agents. Yes, we can secure a sale, no problem."). The same day, we found the bijou apartment overlooking the Med that the couple had dreamed about. It was a great day for them, and a pretty good one for us too.'

Any tough times?

'I've never felt like leaving the South of France, but there have been times when the bureaucracy >



Antibes harbour: not a bad view from the office, eh?

We did it too..



Louise Hillcoat, 39, divides her time between Marrakech and West Yorkshire, overseeing the building of luxury Moroccan holiday homes. 'I spend eight weeks of the year

over there. My job is to liaise between the builders and clients. There can be headaches, but it's so satisfying to see the villas develop. It's wonderful to combine work in Morocco with my life in Yorkshire, although I do miss my two daughters when I'm away.'

www.amazingmorocco.co.uk



Eva Casal, 31, lives in Nerja, Spain, with husband Tim and the two children. She owns the Spanish branch of the relocation agency County Homesearch.

'I first got hooked on property after renovating a London flat. Then, after my husband and I invested in a Spanish villa, we decided to move there full time because we loved the life. Now I help other people find homes in Spain. I love the sun, and the flexibility of being able to take my kids to the beach and tennis lessons.'

www.countyhomesearch.com



Melissa Lowndes, 28, has travelled all over the world as a relocation agent. She's now based in Cyprus, selling holiday villas for Lectos Estates.

'My parents live in Cyprus and while I was visiting, I decided I wanted to be near them. Luckily, my sales work has taken me to all sorts of exotic locations, including Bahrain and Hong Kong, so I was able to relocate easily. I love the easy-going lifestyle - and the year-round sun!

www.lectosestates.com

