



A place to BREATHE

Nicole and Gary Stone chased their dream of a place in the sun to run yoga retreats on the northern Costa Blanca. Nine years later, they're still there, reaping the rewards of their courageous decision.



Nicole meditating on the beach.

Gary and I lived in Guildford, Surrey, with our one-year-old daughter Poppy. I was Business Marketing Manager for NTL Communications (now Virgin Media) and part-time yoga teacher. Gary was a secondary school teacher, and Poppy was spending 10 hours every day at a child minder – essentially someone else was bringing up our daughter.

We were both feeling exhausted by our lifestyle in the UK; working full-time in two stressful jobs, spending hours each day travelling to and from work and often working at home into the evening too. We spent weekends doing housework, food shopping and catching up with family and friends. This pace of life was slowly killing us, literally. I began to suffer various 'minor' illnesses that I ignored or, if I did take time off work, it was the bare minimum amount of time.

One day, sitting at my desk, my body seized up – I could not stand up. My legs no longer worked. I sat there frightened, my heart began to race, and I began to breathe erratically. I spent minutes like this whilst I tried to regain control of my legs. With Herculean effort, I pushed myself up off the chair, unsteady on my feet, and walked to the toilet using the walls to keep my balance, where I splashed my face with cold water and waited until I felt less panicky. I returned to my desk, called my manager explaining that I felt unwell and went home. I called the doctor who suggested the 'episode' could be due to stress and anxiety. After a few visits to various specialists and body workers, my body began to unwind from the tight knot it had become.

The dream begins

Some weeks later, Gary and I were sitting watching TV with dinner on our laps – which was always around 9pm at night, once Poppy was bathed and put to bed – watching *A Place in the Sun* about a couple moving to southern Spain. As soon as the programme finished, Gary turned to me and said, "Why don't we move



A Yoga Breaks group.

'We love the outdoor lifestyle, the beautiful scenery and the delicious fruits and veggies that grow here.'



Gary and Nicole.

to Spain for a couple of years? Just take some time out to rest and spend with Poppy?" I went along with the dream and said, "Yes, why not."

More as a way of de-stressing in the evenings, we began spending a few hours most nights on the internet looking at houses for sale in Spain and dreaming of what our life would be like if we lived there. Before we got out of bed in the mornings, we would often wonder to each other, "If we were in Spain now, what would we do today?"

The more internet research we did, the more convinced we were that we could do it, and even began to save some money each month which would be our 'living money' to tide us over once we got to Spain.



Practicing yoga on the beach.



Nicole loves the outdoor lifestyle Spain offers.

Gary's dad used to live near Alicante 20 years prior to our arrival, so we concentrated our search in the area known as the northern Costa Blanca. In June 2001 we booked a week's holiday south of Alicante to come and see for ourselves the areas we'd seen on the internet. We visited a few estate agents, told them our budget and before we knew it, were being shown houses. One of these – in Calpe – was in our price range; it needed total modernisation, but we took a rash decision and made an offer there and then to buy it.

The villa was built around 32 years ago, and was in desperate need of renovation. It had two bedrooms, a very old bathroom and a lounge – the kitchen had been ripped out by the previous owner. The renovation took around 18 months. We were lucky our builder was communicative but it was a strain trying to manage the renovation long distance.

Returning to the UK, we then spent the next two years liaising with a builder (most of it over the internet and the phone), organising the various work being done at the house. Eventually in October 2003, we moved here lock, stock and barrel.

We initially intended to move to Spain for just two years – long enough for us to take some much needed time out and be with our daughter. Soon after our arrival though, we held a yoga holiday at a mountain hotel not far from the coast for some friends.

The course went well, everyone enjoyed the holiday and this gave us the idea of starting a business running yoga holidays here in Spain. I loved teaching yoga and had always felt happiest when on my yoga mat rather than behind a corporate desk, organising marketing campaigns. So, in 2004 we set up Yoga Breaks in Spain and here we are, nine

years later, and we're still organising yoga holidays for stressed out individuals – just like we used to be.

We are both involved with the day-to-day running of the company – I organise all the marketing of the holidays, client and supplier liaison and teach yoga each day during the holiday. Gary handles all the finances, the social marketing (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter etc), organises guided walks and teaches meditation to the yoga guests.

We also employ local people to work on the holidays – not just because they are local, but because they know this area so well and can add so much local flavour and authenticity to our holidays.

When we're not working, Gary is also a keen golfer – this area has some great courses – and started a golf society shortly after arriving here. In addition to teaching yoga to the locals, I love to go walking in the cooler months. Other than that, we actively seek out local Spanish fiestas where you get to experience and savour a real taste of Spanish traditions and cultures.

There are so many benefits to living here, aside from the obvious one – the weather. We love the outdoor lifestyle, the beautiful scenery, the delicious fruits and veggies that grow here – and are sold at reasonable cost in the local weekly markets. We live close to the sea, and are masters of our own time. That means we can visit the south of Spain and in particular Granada, where we have visited and skied several times. We love it there, but as Poppy is in school, it's not so easy to head off on travels too far from home.

Of course, we miss having family and close friends nearby. We've met many new friends here since we moved to Spain – but we've also said

goodbye to lots of friends too. Someone once told us that majority of people who move here return back to their home country within two years, because of the 4 D's: "Death, Divorce, Drink and Despair". This can sometimes be true, but many people move here and struggle. Good, well-paid employment is very hard to come by, so unless you have your own money, your own business or work for someone who pays well, it can be difficult to make it work as there is very little (if any) financial support from Spanish authorities.

We certainly have no plans to move home. We want to allow our daughter to finish her education here, and to continue running our Yoga Breaks in Spain.

Nicole and Gary's top tips

- **Don't rush into it** – do as much research as you can.
- **Rent before you buy** – it's the best way to discover if the area is right for you, and if not, you can keep looking.
- **Make sure you come with enough money** to last you at least two years.
- **Most importantly, learn the language** as soon as you can.
- **Be prepared to work very hard.**



YOGA BREAK IN SPAIN

Yoga holidays run for between three and seven days. Prices vary, but October's courses run from 18th to 23rd (£550) and from 26th October to 1st November (£995 in a luxury suite, or £895 each for a twin suite). www.yogabreaks.org.uk