

GREAT escapes

Ever wanted to get away from it all? Well, meet the people who've done it. Here, a former stock market dealer tells AMY ANDERSON how he gave up office life in Bristol to start a gliding school in Spain

Steve Ham, 38, was a stock market dealer from Bristol on an annual salary of £40,000. In 1991, fed up with the British weather and being stuck in an office five days a week, he left his job and moved to the Spanish village of Piedrahita, in central Spain, to start a gliding school. A year later he met Puri Almansa, then a 21-year-old student and now his wife and expecting their first child. Together, they earn about £30,000 a year running gliding courses and a guest house.

Why did you decide to leave Britain?

I hated working the traditional nine-to-five day. Although my job paid very well, it always seemed insignificant to me compared with my real love, which was hang-gliding and paragliding. I used to own a waterfront flat in Bristol, but when the stock market crashed in 1985, I was made redundant and had to sell it. I did get another trading job,



but found it increasingly difficult to deal with the demands it made on me. I came to feel trapped in an office when I could have been out gliding, soaring with birds and discovering the countryside from the air.

So what happened next?

Every time I returned from holidays to the dismal UK weather my heart sank and I began to dream of moving abroad. Early in 1991, I started to buy and sell gliders in my spare time. The gliding company was looking to set up a distribution network in Spain and said I could represent them out there. I left my trading job and spent a number of months, living off my savings, flying in most of the regions of Spain until I decided upon Piedrahita as a base. It has fantastic flying conditions and the village is



The sky's the limit: Steve Ham met his wife Puri, below, in Spain. She is expecting their first child. Below left: Steve in his broker days

village with a population of only ten people — all over 65 years old. I felt very isolated and wondered whether I had done the right thing. Things improved when I managed to rent a house in Piedrahita. I set up an office and had enough space to store gliders and have a few guests to stay. Over the next two years I attracted paying guests by organising flying competitions. I also made money from selling gliders in Spain, so I had enough to live on. I missed comforts such as fast food. Just getting things such as fax and phone lines in took weeks.

And the benefits?

Once I was accepted by the villagers, it was like being adopted by a whole new family. Now, after almost ten years, Piedrahita is established as one of the premier world flying sites. I spend up to five hours a day soaring across this spectacular area with my clients. On poor weather days we take groups white-water kayaking or rafting and have started kite surfing on the lakes. Working in an office in the UK would be like a prison sentence now.

lovely. I could run my distribution company from there as well as setting up a gliding school. By the summer of 1992, I had moved there permanently, taking all my savings, which by now were only a few thousand, but this was enough to get started.

What are the drawbacks?

At first, things were very difficult. I spoke only basic Spanish and the villagers were so reserved that to begin with they wouldn't even rent me a house. I ended up living in a nearby

What do you miss about Britain?

I do miss Britain a lot — tea, beer, Marmite and also the green and luscious countryside.

Have you got away from it all? Send your story to Great Escapes, Weekend, Northcliffe House, 2 Derry Street, London, W8 5TT.