

Channel 4 - A Place in the Sun...



For some people, the phrase 'life begins at 40' amounts to little more than a vague resolution to join the local gym. This is invariably followed by another resolution, at 41, to actually go there.

But for Maggie Waldon, who recently celebrated her 40th birthday on holiday in Crete, it really was the start of a whole new life.

Making the Move



She and a group of friends had come to this rugged island to climb a mountain and toast her birthday with cocktails at the top. A photo capturing the moment – everyone with glasses held high – now takes pride of place in Maggie's Cretan village home. Because somewhere between the top of that mountain and heading home to Bristol, she decided to move from Bristol and settle in Crete.

She and partner Alan Parsons clearly aren't people who do things by halves. They returned to Crete and made an offer on an abandoned wreck in the quiet village of Mourne, 20 minutes inland from Rethymnon on the island's north coast. They paid £25,000 for it back in 2001, and have taken two years to turn it into a home. Alan used to renovate Victorian houses in Bristol, so he had a head-start in project-managing the work, but the architecture, building materials and techniques – not to mention the Greek language – were all new to him. He rented rooms in nearby Spili while Maggie, in those days the regional manager for a training company, returned to work in the UK. "I didn't come out until there were flushing toilets!" she says. Parts of the house are over 400 years old, so renovating was an act of recreation; a hidden fireplace is now a feature of the house while the kitchen - which opens onto the sunny courtyard - was once a dusty stable. "I'd never worked on a building that was in such a state," admits Alan.

Most jobs had to be done from scratch, from installing the sewerage and water supply to building the chunky wooden staircase that leads from the living room up to the terrace. Of course, there were set-backs – for example when builders didn't turn up for work. "Now, when I manage other projects I know why this

might happen, such as national holidays. But when you're in the dark about these things it's very hard," Alan says.

Although he had help with the major structural work, Alan did all the finishing and details himself. Beams were buffed to a deep sheen, and simple white walls were teamed with pastel shades. Maggie arrived and found a local carpenter who could make bespoke kitchen cabinets (they were far beyond the reaches of IKEA delivery), and created the one-off stained-glass windows herself. The result is a beautiful home, full of warm touches and pleasant architectural details. An old stone sink is preserved in a corner of the living room and brickwork alcoves hold pretty ornaments. A wood-burning stove warms the main living room, while the original fireplace is the focal point of a cosy study. Floors are laid with mellow wooden floorboards, terracotta tiles or flagstones, with timber beams and pitched roofs above.



Each of the four bedrooms has its own character, while the large living/dining room is great for entertaining. The courtyard also serves as a living space, with steps up to a garden of fruit trees and a sunny roof terrace. So what about the area? The village of Mourne is set in the foothills of Mount Kedros and, like nearby busier Spili, is perfect for walking, birdwatching and admiring the wild flowers in spring. For most of the year, life goes by at a donkey's pace – and, in fact, they are still used on Mourne's winding streets. August is the only busy time: "It's when the whole of Greece is on holiday," says Maggie. "All the relatives from Athens arrive, and it's a time of festivals, music and family trips to the nearby beaches on the south-west coast. These are mostly used by Greeks and are very unspoilt and quiet – outside August!"

Maggie and Alan are now part and parcel of Mourne life. Their initiation was probably their first winter there: said to be the worst in 100 years. "There were several metres of snow, which cut off the village for days," remembers Maggie. Alan, who had a new truck, pitched in and helped local farmers get out to feed and rescue their sheep. "You just did what you could to help," he says. His instinctive kindness was repaid with parcels of food. "A lot of bartering goes on here," explains Maggie. "We might lend a welding tool to someone, and then a few days later you'll find a bag of fruit, vegetables – or even the local firewater, raki." One of Maggie and Alan's first invites in the village was to dinner with the neighbours. They have since become great friends – but the evening got off to a wobbly start. "I realised I'd forgotten to tell them I was vegetarian and asked their son to pass on the message," says Maggie. "When we arrived, they proudly announced that they'd made me a special 'vegetarian' dish – snails!" If Maggie and Alan came to Crete for a quiet life, they certainly aren't getting one. "Once the local people saw our renovation, they started



telling us about their old family homes for sale. They would prefer to see them restored than knocked down," says Maggie. Alan has just finished renovating a beautiful three-bedroom house in Spili, perched on the top of a rock.

It has all his signature touches, from carefully-crafted timber to a grand fireplace. The couple are now selling their home to move on to their next project..