



Expats running massage business in Alps

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Anna and Rich above Lac de la Plagne, and Nancroix

Life in the mountains is shaping up nicely for Richard Crow and his wife Anna, as Judy Armstrong discovers

Richard Crow stands on the foundations of his new house. He stares at the view: the soaring peak of Bellecôte, glistening with glaciers; the pyramid-point of L'Aliet, crumbly and seductive as Toblerone; the verdant forests at the entrance to the Vanoise National Park. In the valley at his feet, walkers make their way along footpaths to alpine lakes, and on the rock cliffs, eagles live.

Richard is a happy man. Tired, but happy. In the last 12 months, he has married his long-term girlfriend, Anna, designed and started to build their first home, and expanded their mobile massage business. He shakes his head at the wonder of it all, and begins to tell the story.

It is a spider's web of chance meetings, travel and contacts, glued to ambition, a love of the French mountains and the ability to see forward to a busy future. Words avalanche out of him and his enthusiasm positively glows.

Back at their alpine apartment – just 300m down the road and recently sold, in preparation for moving into their new home in autumn – Anna grins at him. Her face is deeply tanned, with the ghost of goggle-marks from a fun-filled winter. She is slim, athletic and beautiful; they make an almost impossibly perfect couple.

This is just as well: for the past eight years they have lived, worked and played together, based in a 60m² apartment in a farming hamlet, near the end of an alpine valley. Moving into 'the-house-that-Rich-built' in October will be the end of one era and the start of another: one with an office removed from the living room.

It didn't happen overnight; in fact, they were lucky it happened at all. Despite attending Leeds Metropolitan University at the same time, and being involved in the ski club (Anna) and snowboard club (Rich), with many mutual friends, they never actually met. It was only after Anna had graduated with a BSc in Sport & Exercise Sciences, and Rich had tucked his BA in Three-Dimensional Design under his belt, that they ended up in the same apartment in Whistler, Canada.

"Rich was working there for a season after running the snowboard club at Leeds Met, and I was couch-surfing with a friend, Sue, at the start of a year's travelling," says Anna. "Sue was a friend of Helen, who Rich was working and sharing an apartment with. We turned up and slept on their floor, so we could afford to ski."

A year or so later Rich, having finished at Whistler, travelled his North America visa to death and returned to Britain, couldn't resist the lure of the snow. So he headed for an old stamping ground: the village of Peisey in the Tarentaise, Savoie. Having run trips here, to Les Arcs, for the snowboard club, he knew the area and had local contacts, plus access to a friend's chalet.

Needing to earn money and scratch his creative itch, he set up Sketchbook Films. "I filmed people on holiday, snowboarding madly through the trees with a huge video camera tucked under my arm; it would be a lot easier now with high-definition head cams!" he laughs. That winter Anna flopped onto his sofa for a week's ski holiday – and finally, they got together.

At season's end, Rich returned to the UK and a job as art editor for Italian football magazine, *Cacio Italia*. By now in love with the Tarentaise – the mountains, snow and lifestyle – he arranged to work remotely, and planned his return to France.

He was also in love with Anna. So he tracked her down and started a campaign to entice her to Savoie. But Anna had decided to "sneak in a cheeky ski season" at Whistler. "It was such a huge decision: to follow the dream of Whistler, or to follow the man," she says. "At the last minute, I followed the man."

Being an independent woman, she found a job running a ski chalet in Plan Peisey. "Had I run a chalet before? No! But at 27 I was older than most chalet hosts, so I had more life experience. I knew how to cook, run a house and be sociable," she says. "I had one day off a week and took every chance to ski."

And so the seeds were sown: Anna and Rich in the Tarentaise, swept away by the opportunities for work and play, and keen to return on a more permanent basis. But, they had only one income and Anna was determined to do something about it.

"At this stage we had very basic French. I couldn't see the point of it at school, and bunked off every lesson," says Anna. "Rich had a GCSE so his grammar was OK, but we couldn't communicate enough to work in a French environment."

They came back anyway, to Peisey and their growing group of friends. Wandering through the village one day, they paused at an estate agent's window display. Spontaneously, they made

appointments to see apartments and soon put an offer on one a few strides up the valley in Nancroix. It was cheap because it was barely habitable, but it was theirs.

Over two months they took it apart and put it back together again. From dingy 1950s decor, they created a bright, light home with stripped floors, high ceilings and pale walls, decorated with their treasures from travels. “It was a fantastic feeling to move in that winter of 2005, to our first home,” she says.

Next, she needed that income. Anna had always had an interest in massage and, while running the chalet, had circulated questionnaires among guests. An astonishing 95% said they would consider paying for massage and well-being treatments during their ski holiday.

So, Anna gained the qualifications necessary to top-up her degree, took leaflets designed by Rich, and set off to establish a mobile massage business: Massage Me, slogan ‘we come to you’. Targeting tour operators, chalet owners and hotels in Peisey, she established a niche and worked hard to build a reputation for quality and reliability. “At times I thought, ‘What the hell am I doing?’, but we’d bought the apartment and we had to go for it,” she says.

The first winter was a roaring success; Anna was run off her feet. Summer was harder, with fewer visitors to the valley, but she pinpointed a demand among mountain bikers and walkers who were discovering the area’s potential.

The second winter, she recruited a massage therapist from Britain and, with advice from their accountant, set up as a *professionnel indépendant*. The third winter, Rich gave up his art editor job and focused full-time on Massage Me. He developed marketing material, built websites, created branding for uniforms, bags, massage couches. “We realised this was a long-term business and we had to take it up a gear,” says Rich. “People want a professional service, where therapists look and behave professionally, backed by a brand. We knew we had to put everything into it, and we did.”

That season, Anna had seven therapists working in four resorts. By 2013, Massage Me offered 14 therapists in resorts across Portes du Soleil, Paradiski, La Rosière and Ste-Foy, Espace Killy and Trois Vallées, plus Rich in marketing, a part-timer in the office and someone working solely on social media. “It keeps me awake at night,” admits Anna, “and working from home can be a

challenge. If I get caught by the computer on the way to breakfast, I could still be in my pyjamas at 3pm.”

For the next two years Rich, now 36, and Anna, 35, plan to consolidate, rather than expand, Massage Me, with an office remote from the new house, and a full-time office manager. What they offer is impressive, with treatments ranging from Swedish, deep tissue and sports massage, to hot stone treatments and facials.

All therapists are recruited in Britain in autumn and provided with accommodation and lift passes from December through April. They work on a sub-contract basis, with basic French an advantage: “When people ask what linguistic level they need to be, we say, just be polite and try,” says Rich. “We don’t take on anyone under 25, so therapists tend to be qualified women, and sometimes men, on career breaks, who like the idea of working a winter season.”

So, they’re busy, busy, busy. “It’s been a bit crazy,” he admits. “In 2012 we were expanding the business and setting it up as a SARL, getting married and designing a house. In 2013, we are developing the business and building the house. At least in 2014 it’ll just be the business.”

The wedding, in August, was a milestone. Rich had asked Anna to marry him after they had hiked to the Col d’Aliet, inside the boundaries of the Vanoise National Park. “It had to be there, because we look up at it from our new house, and from the col we were looking down on our new life,” he says dreamily. After the wedding registration at Peisey town hall, they and their guests took a chairlift to a restaurant high on the mountainside. There wasn’t a dry eye in the house as they read the vows they had written themselves.

With the wedding over, work began in earnest on the house. The location is glorious, with unrestricted views of their alpine playground. It has been entirely designed by Rich, and mostly built by him too. “It’s the only way we can afford to do it,” he says. Local craftsmen are involved and the design is sympathetic to their French neighbours.

“It’s every man’s dream to build a home – isn’t it?” asks Rich, hands cradling a perfect scale-model of his house. “As a designer, I see it as a great opportunity: I have the skill sets to create something, and just enough DIY ability to make it real.”

Anna smiles. “We’re lucky: locals pat us on the back, saying ‘you really got the perfect plot.’ The view is knockout, and we love being on the edge of a ski resort and within 1km of one of France’s most beautiful national parks. Rich is excited about building it, and I’m excited about living in it.

“We’re settled here, we have friends and a business, and hopefully, soon, a family. Neither of us could imagine returning to England.”

Rich nods: “We don’t have much free time, so we maximise it. We don’t work weekends, and if it’s a powder day, we’ll take the phone with us. It’s hard work, but what we learn – about running a business, creating a franchise, dealing with staff, accountants and the French system – has to stand us in good stead. Life is a learning curve, and we’ve always said: work to play, but work should be play too.”

He adds: “My father said, better to do this and love it, than be stuck behind a desk and miss out on life. Do what makes you happy.”

So Rich stands on the foundations of his new house, staring at the view with his arm around his wife. Above him, glaciers creak under a cloudless sky and eagles nest on the cliff edges. He smiles, a wide, open smile. He is, indeed, a happy man. LF

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