



CHILD'S PLAY

How do you build a business based on a lack of Tumble Tots and the power of Lego? Antonia Beauvoisin-Brown tells *Vicky Leigh* how putting her family first has been the key to success and to more than a decade of happiness on the Côte d'Azur

Despite living in a “hip and happening area” near the seafront just outside of Brighton, Antonia Beauvoisin-Brown decided one grey and gloomy day that she fancied a change of scene, and the south of France seemed to be the obvious choice. Her sister was already living there and together they had been running an au pair agency, the idea for which came about as a result of Antonia’s own family’s needs. Wanting an au pair for her son Louis but keen to avoid the additional cost of paying agency fees, she partnered with her sister who would recruit au pairs looking for positions in England while Brighton-based Antonia would find families to match them with.

“That was the first business I set up that I personally benefited from,” she says.

“I got my first au pair free of charge in a way – I paid the au pair but I didn’t have to pay an agency fee, and because we were thinking that we might move to France ourselves one day, we asked her if she would speak to our son in French so that he started to hear the language. His first word was probably *voiture*.”

CALL OF THE SOUTH

That day duly came and with Antonia and husband Mark keen to make the move while Louis was still young and before he started school, they sold their Brighton home and moved into rented accommodation in the area.

“We decided this was the moment, that if we were going to do it then we should just do it,” says Antonia. “So we thought, let’s go to France, live the blue-sky

experience and raise bilingual children – and what an amazing gift that would be to give them.”

Daughter Daisy arrived while they were still living in Brighton and was nine months old when Antonia boarded a flight to Nice with her, toddler Louis and a very large rucksack. Mark stayed behind to finish packing and organising their furniture removal to France, and joined them in France once his job transfer had been approved.

The couple bought a property in the village of Le Bar-sur-Loup, close to the perfume capital of Grasse, and although Antonia was ready to make the change, the difference in culture on arriving in France still came as something of a surprise. “I’d read *Living France* and followed all of the advice to help us settle in here but the

culture shock hits you quite quickly,” she says. “We’d moved from Brighton which was so vibrant and family-friendly with so much going on for children. I had just assumed I would be doing exactly the same things but with more sunshine, and when I realised how little there was for children under the age of three it was a bit of a shock as that’s how I had planned to get to know people.”

Paying for their move costs and adjusting to a reduced household income meant that Antonia and Mark’s budget wouldn’t stretch to sending the children to an international school, and having already once set up a business based around the needs of her family, Antonia decided to take the same approach again.

SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

She began to research what was available in her local area and created an online database to help her identify what was on offer – and where any gaps might be. And so it was that she hit upon the idea for a second business that would benefit her both personally and professionally. In 2007 she established KidooLand, a club offering activities in both French and English, but soon found that she would need to adapt to the needs of her market while still keeping her own children in mind.



A lack of activities for children inspired Antonia to create KidooLand



Antonia and husband Mark moved from Brighton and took on a renovation project

“Originally I offered activities in both languages but I realised very quickly that what people really wanted was English only, as they felt they could do activities in French in lots of other places,” says Antonia. “I had to adapt very quickly while still making sure that my own children would benefit from what we were offering. Louis was going to a French school and the progress he made from the September to December was incredible. I started to worry that he might lose his English and

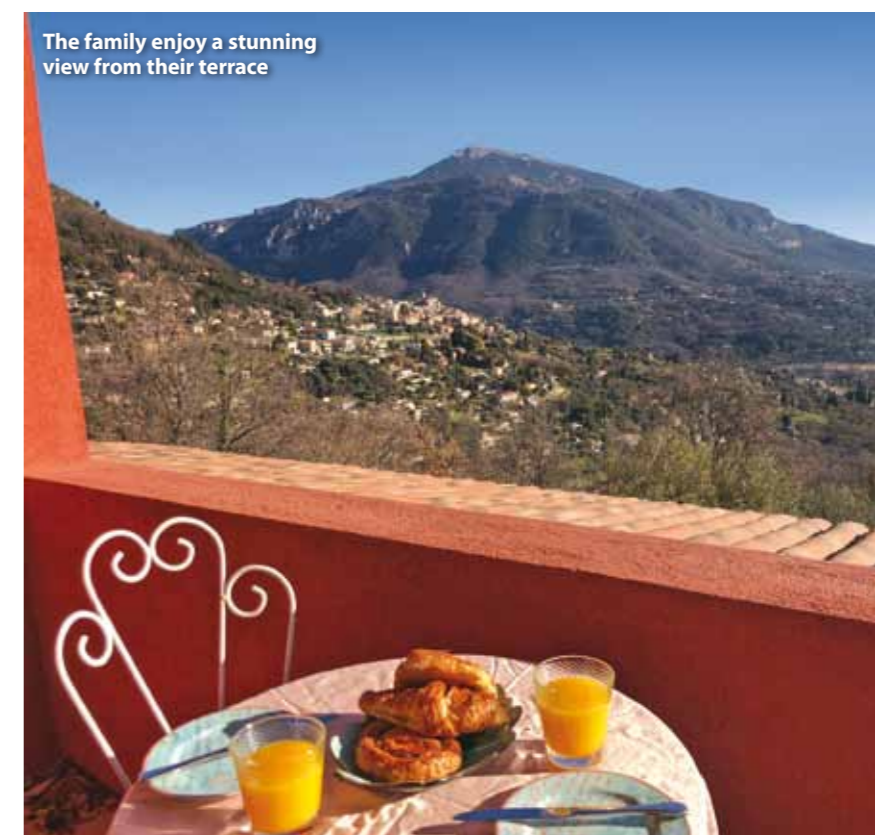
realised that concentrating on English at KidooLand could work well for everyone.”

Slowly but surely Antonia began to add more activities to the timetable, including cookery, yoga and Pilates, and she also introduced a pre-school so that daughter Daisy could follow the Early Years Foundation Skills system in a structured environment but in a group of six rather than 15, which was the case at the local *crèche* she was going to. And then Antonia had what she calls her Lego moment. ▶



Above: Teenagers enjoy an excursion organised by KidooLand

Below: Pilates is one of the many activities on offer



The family enjoy a stunning view from their terrace

“When Louis was about eight, I got cross with him for not tidying his Lego pieces away again - he always left pieces lying all over his bedroom floor and I was forever trying not to step on them. However, I realised he was simply being creative and I needed to turn this into something positive rather than keep telling him off. And that’s when I came up with the idea of running Lego holiday camps at KidooLand, where the children could be as creative as they liked and make whatever they wanted, but had to use English to explain what they were doing.”

Antonia’s instincts were right and she discovered that tapping into the popularity of these colourful building bricks was the perfect way to encourage children to learn

English while having fun with something they love to play with. The success of the Lego camps - “we had a room full of 10-year-old boys eating out of the palm of our hand” - prompted her to start involving her own children more by asking them what activities they would like to be able to do, and then introducing them at KidooLand. As a result she has organised fashion weeks, entrepreneur weeks and outings to museums along the Côte d’Azur, as well as sailing and paddleboarding excursions to name but a few.

ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

Louis and Daisy are now teenagers and are both, of course, completely bilingual, which was a driving force behind Antonia

and Mark’s decision to move to France in the first place.

“When Louis was little, if I said his name in a French accent he would say, ‘oui maman’, but if I said it the English way he would reply, ‘yes mum’. He knew the difference from a very young age and from just one word,” says Antonia.

“Mark didn’t speak any French when we moved but I remember when I heard him on the phone to a mechanic and realised how far he had come too. I also remember thinking he could take on all these sorts of jobs now because before then it was me doing them!”

It has now been more than a decade since the family moved to Alpes-Maritimes and Antonia continues to be guided by

TOP TIPS

Keen to set up your own business in France? Antonia shares her advice

Join local Facebook groups in your area as a way of interacting with the local community and finding out what is going on

Do some market research

Don’t go it alone – join or set up networking groups, and contact your local *Chambre de Commerce et d’Industrie (cci.fr)*

Look out for a mentor/coach or join a Mastermind group (a group of business owners that meets to share tips and advice on topics including social media, communication, technology etc). Mine are in the USA and I do this online. I wish I had done this years ago as the traction I have had since using them has been amazing. They keep me focused, help me when I start to doubt or have an issue and hold me accountable to the goals I set



Son Louis and daughter Daisy continue to reap the benefits of growing up in France



Above: The family moved to the village of Le Bar-sur-Loup near Grasse



Above: Antonia enjoys her outdoor ‘snug’ at the end of a busy day



Renovating their home has been a labour of love for Antonia and Mark

“If you have a passion then I believe you will achieve your goal”

her own experiences as a new arrival in France, helping her to become part of both the area’s local and expat communities as well as adding further strings to her bow.

In addition to establishing KidooLand she has also set up a Facebook group (Côte d’Azur Living), which has over 9,000 members and has given her a good insight into the expat lifestyle in the south of France. “I think lots of us who live abroad like change and to shake things up a bit but there are still challenges - it’s not easy to start from scratch when you don’t have the support network you had in your home country or your group of friends to go to the pub with. And if you don’t have children it can be a lot harder because you don’t have the common connection of the school gates, which is where the Facebook group comes in.”

It was the reaction within the Facebook group to the Nice terror attack in July 2016 that provided the catalyst for Antonia’s podcast, Riviera Firefly, where she interviews local entrepreneurs and offers tips and advice on settling in to life in France.

“I could see how affected people were emotionally but also from a business point of view - visitors were cancelling gîte bookings because they didn’t want to risk coming here. I wanted to show people how amazing the Côte d’Azur is and remind

them why they should still come. It was also another way to reach out to those who have moved here and might be feeling a bit isolated.”

LABOUR OF LOVE

At this point Antonia happens to mention that she and Mark also took on a major renovation project when they bought their French home - “it’s been a labour of love but we’re nearly there” - which means she’s been managing builders and disruption alongside her business ventures. She’s clearly someone who isn’t afraid of a challenge, and who focuses on the solution rather than the problem. Keeping her family’s needs at the forefront of her mind throughout certainly seems to have paid dividends in her life so far, so does she feel that everything has worked out as she originally hoped it would?

“If you have a passion then I believe you will achieve your goal,” she says. “Setting up a business that you and your family can personally enjoy and benefit from is a great way to motivate yourself, and it makes up for all those extra entrepreneurial hours put in. We have a stunning view across the valley from our terrace and every day it’s a reminder of the beauty of living down here.” **LF** kidooland.com