

# I gave it all up ... to dive in the Seychelles

I used to joke about quitting my job in Leeds and moving to the Seychelles. Then one day I thought, why not?

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**I** loved my job for 15 years - really loved it - until one day I didn't. I ran the pop music degree at Leeds College of Music and it was a great creative environment. But one day it occurred to me that I had to wait 16 years until I got my pension, and the idea of sitting around waiting felt like no way to live.

I was 45, and this coincided with the breakdown of my 20-year relationship. It was a classic mid-life crisis. I let it be known that I didn't want to stay on at work, and when they restructured there was no longer a position for me. At that moment I thought, "Oh shit, what have I done?"

I didn't have a plan at first, just my redundancy money. I'd always wanted to go travelling, so one lunchtime I Googled "international volunteering" and up popped "marine conservation in the Seychelles". I thought it sounded ludicrous, and began joking to friends that I was going to do it. I'd never been diving in my life and had no marine biology experience, but the more I joked about it the more I wondered if I could actually do it. Then one day I signed up.

I sold my house and packed my possessions into 20 boxes, which I left at my mum's. Everybody said I was incredibly brave, but I wasn't scared. I don't have kids, so I didn't have that sort of responsibility. I was excited. Plus, the volunteer programme was only for three months - after I finished I'd come home.

Flying into the Seychelles for the first time, I thought, "Oh my God, this is real." It was the stereotype of paradise - palm-fringed white beaches, surrounded by mountains and jungle. I was thrown into a new way of life: getting up at 6am, making breakfast, doing chores, then diving. Home was now a mixed dormitory filled mostly with 18- to 22-year-olds on their gap years. There were no hot showers. No one wore shoes.

My first dive was incredible: I rolled off the boat into crystal clear 30C (86F) water, surrounded by coral and angel fish, butterfly fish - even sea turtles. I had trained for my PADI in 4C water in the Lake District, so 30C water felt ... nice.

Two and a half years later, I'm still here. I'm now a marine educator, teaching visitors about the sea life and taking them snorkelling and diving. My desk is a picnic table 10 metres from

the best beach on the island.

I would never have imagined myself living like this. I used to dream about travelling, but there was always something going on: a job to do, a deadline, a relationship to come home to. Now I can't imagine going back to England. I don't know what I'd do there. My next step will probably be heading off to a new job perhaps in Costa Rica, Mexico or the Maldives.

There are sacrifices. I earn in a month what I used to earn in a week, so you don't do this for the money. We're 2,000km from the mainland, and sometimes the island runs out of onions or shampoo or some other essential. Living here completely cures you of consumerism.

But there is a feeling you have when you scuba dive that makes it all worth it. You look around at the white sand, at the palm-fringed takamaka trees hanging into the turquoise water, and pairs of long-tailed tropic birds above you. Then you dive, and become completely absorbed in this little world, and you feel free.

*As told to Becky Barnicoat*

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