



"I'm loving the high life"

Nicky Moss always had her head in the clouds, but now she's made a profession out of paragliding in Barcelona, discovers **Ron Toft**

Photographs **Steve Godfrey**

AS A CHILD GROWING UP on a farm in Loughborough, Leicestershire, Nicky Moss was "a bit of a tomboy".

She always wanted to be outside and relished new challenges. "My dad taught me to drive tractors when I was four or five. I was also a very competitive horse-rider."

Her love for adventure and the great outdoors saw her taking up skiing and crag climbing. And, after obtaining a geography degree at Loughborough University, she trained to be a chartered quantity surveyor simply because it was a way of being outdoors rather than being stuck in an office.

In 1999, after working in Derbyshire and London for several years, she got a job in Edinburgh. "I had visited the city and thought I would quite like to live there," she says.

Little did she know at the time, but moving to Scotland was destined to irrevocably change her life, both professionally and personally.

"Initially I didn't know anybody in Edinburgh. I had a new job but what I also needed was a new life."

She saw an advertisement for

paragliding and decided to have a go. "The minute my feet left the ground for the first time, I was hooked. The sensation was incredible. Flying quickly took over my life, becoming an obsession rather than a hobby."

Nicky, now 37, was taught to fly by instructor Mark Graham. They got to know each other well and later became a couple.

After spending two weeks paragliding with Mark in Spain, where the weather is far more suited to sky sports and the thermals much stronger, she knew this was the life for her.

"The following spring I gave up my job and spent a whole month in Spain." She then decided to take a six-month paragliding sabbatical. "I was confident I could get another job later. The trouble was, paragliding in Spain for six months ruined my desire for a

"From the minute my feet left the ground, I was hooked"

'proper' career. From that point on, I divided my time between flying and contract surveying work."

Then, in 2001, Mark was offered a job as an electronics engineer in Barcelona. "He said 'yes' and I jumped up and down and asked if I could go too. Mark emigrated in the March and I followed a few months later, after I had completed the contract on which I was working, had my dog vaccinated and micro-chipped and generally sorted out my life."

Mark had worked in Spain before and was reasonably proficient in day-to-day Spanish, though not fluent. Nicky, however, couldn't speak a word.

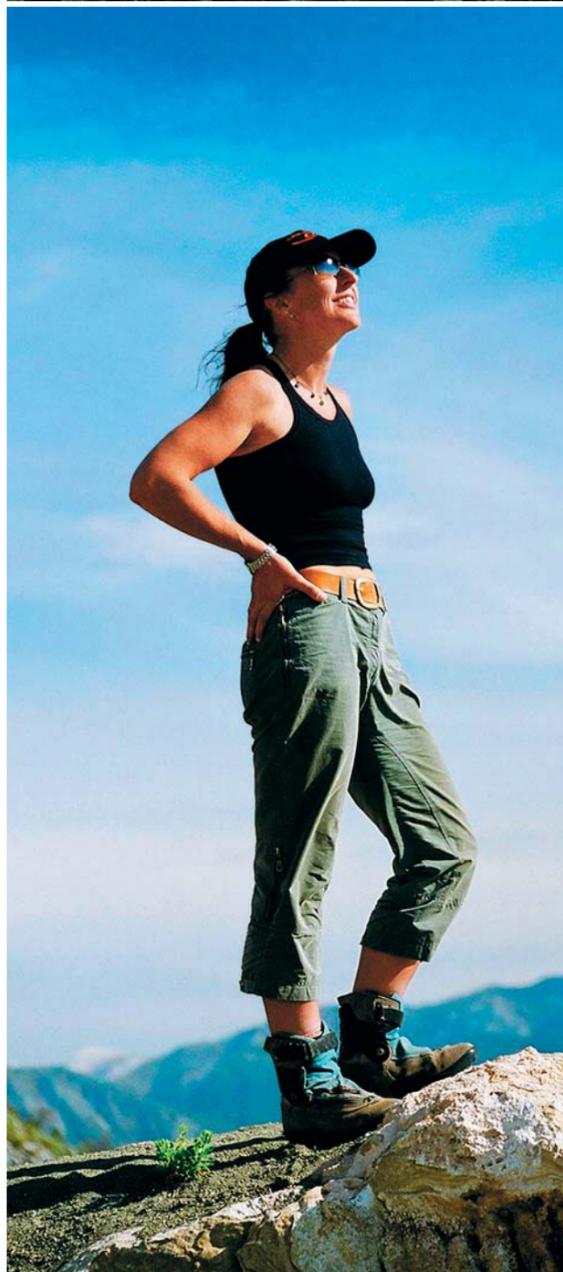
With the help of friends, the couple found and rented a small flat in La Floresta, near Barcelona. Three years ago they bought a little house in the same quiet, forested village where there are few neighbours, apart from wild boar.

Their house initially had two bedrooms, but within three hours of the sale it had only one. "Mark rang at midday on our first day as owners and asked what I was going to do with the wall separating the ➤

Nicky has been able to pick up chunks of Spanish phrases, mainly to do with paragliding, taking the dog to the vet and getting the car serviced



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two bedrooms. I replied ‘what wall?’ I had already knocked it down and ripped out a lot of other things too. I converted the house from a two-bed place with insufficient room to swing a cat to a one-bed property with a bigger living room and a computer area at one end.”

Jill-of-all-trades Nicky is no stranger to DIY. “When I was 21 or 22, I bought and ripped apart a 1920s terraced house and put it back together again over a period of 10 years. I would quite like to do more of that sort of thing. In fact, we are currently awaiting planning permission to extend our house and put in a studio underneath – two years after applying.”

She hopes to turn their La Floresta home into a show property for Britons and other foreigners thinking of buying a house in the Barcelona area. “I would like to be able to put my DIY and surveying skills to good use by managing properties locally for holidaymakers and investors.”

Nicky is already a world-class paragliding pilot and the holder of several prestigious titles. In 2003, and again in 2004, she was female champion of Catalunya. Last year she was also female open champion of Australia, female open champion of Caldeas Larouco, Portugal, and female Himalayan open champion.

In October 2004, much to her surprise, she was invited to become a member of the British paragliding team. “I had been competing quite a lot and getting some favourable results, but I didn’t really expect to be selected. That was really exciting and a great honour.”

Then in January she was part of a four-strong UK team that won the Manilla open championship in Australia.

She is currently the top British female in the world rankings and 13th female overall in the world.

“I am still not personally satisfied with my performance,” she says. “I am happy in general with how far I’ve come but I still regard myself as



being at the bottom of a very steep learning curve.”

She is now a familiar figure in Spanish paragliding circles. “There are only a couple of female Spanish flyers, one of whom, the national champion, is a good friend of mine. Despite the scarcity of female flyers, the guys here are very supportive, very encouraging, which is great.”

She is also coping well with the language. “It’s amazing how you can pick up chunks of Spanish. I can now talk quite happily about paragliding, about taking the dog to the vet, about getting the car serviced and about houses. You end up with a kind of restricted vocabulary, depending on your interests and work. Mark is equally good at talking in Spanish about computers, engineering and things like that.”

Apart from improving her flying,

Nicky would dearly love to set a new world record. “There are various records in terms of speed over distance, length of flight and things like that. This year I am going to try to set a new record for the quickest time around a triangular course.”

Although the next world championships are two years away, she is already “working towards a podium position, although realistically I don’t think that’s very likely. But I have hope and determination.”

Competing internationally is a costly business. In a typical year, Nicky can spend around €20,000 simply on flights, accommodation and food.

“At present, I am meeting most of the costs myself and my resources are getting low, given that I don’t have a job and Mark’s contract

recently finished. What I really need is commercial sponsorship. If I can’t get that, I might have to return to surveying on a part-time basis.”

But there’s no chance of giving up the thrill of flying.

“The most thrilling flights are those with birds,” she says. “Probably one of the best was in Australia earlier this year when a huge wedge-tailed eagle flew alongside me. It flew at my wingtip, rose on the thermals with me, then came over the top of my wing and looked down on me. That was a stunning experience.”

Her scariest moment was in France last year while taking part in the British championships. “Suddenly, I was in the strongest ‘sink’ I had ever experienced. It was like being in a tumble dryer. I was thrown all over the place. My glider had no forward speed and the wing

“I was in the strongest sink – like being in a tumble drier”

was folding up and collapsing. At one point I thought I was going to hit the side of the mountain, but fortunately I didn’t.

“Those watching from the ground said the whole incident lasted a few minutes. To me, it felt like days. Eventually the problem sorted itself out when I was about 100m above the ground and I landed safely.”

What is it that makes paragliding so special? “It’s being on your own in a completely noiseless environment,” says Nicky. “It’s being able to sit under a cloud and look down on everything and see things from a completely different perspective.

“It’s also the sensation of being liberated and completely at one with nature.”

Potential sponsors can contact Nicky via her website www.nickymoss.com, or tel: 0034 93 674 5196