



Fly away with me...

Words by Sarah Urquhart, pictures by Nicky Moss

Midlands girl, Nicky Moss, moved to Catalonia three years ago and her feet still haven't hit the ground... For her there's only one way to see the beautiful Spanish countryside – from 4,000 feet in the air

Life for Nicky Moss has quite literally taken off. Today, this former quantity surveyor from Loughborough has seen Spain from a perspective few others have. Yet, five years ago, she had never dreamed of launching herself off a hillside attached to few spindly threads to a parachute. Back then her feet were firmly planted on the ground, usually submerged in mud on a rain-soaked building site in the Midlands.

But now, Britain's number two-ranked female paragliding pilot, who also happens to be the Catalan and Australian female paragliding champion, lives with her boyfriend Mark on the edge of Barcelona, in the pretty community of

La Floresta, hidden amongst the rolling, green forests of the Collserola Natural Park. It's no coincidence that Nicky, 36, lives in a region of Spain with an ideal climate for paragliding.

"Spain is simply one of the best countries for flying in the world," she raves. "It boasts the mountains of the Pyrenees, the plains of the Sierra Nevada and the Central Spanish desert. It is a country of extremes. But best of all, the steady supply of sunshine and low winds make flying in Spain one of the greatest pleasures on earth. It is a country of geographical wonders."

So how did a quantity surveyor from the Midlands come to be a world-class paraglider living in northern Spain? It was the classic

scenario of 'going through a tough time' that brought Nicky and the sport together. "I had moved to Edinburgh for my job and although it's a beautiful city, I didn't know a soul and it was hard. You know how agony aunts always say join a club, so I decided to take the plunge and join a local paragliding group. I had always been an outdoors person, growing up on a farm, and I enjoyed horse-riding and skiing, but I had long wanted to try paragliding. After all, how many people can say they can fly?"

Opposite and above

Paragliders take advantage of the thermals rising from the Catalanian countryside; Nicky prepares for launch



Left
Nicky began paragliding in 1999; currently she is the 2004 female champion of Catalonia and Australia

Clockwise from right
Nicky relaxes in the sun with another close friend of hers; olive trees are green dots... from 4,000 feet; Alicante province is another popular paragliding destination



“The countryside that passes beneath her is made up of rolling green fields and orchards, dotted with sleepy Romanesque villages and patches of ancient woodland, all to the backdrop of the towering Pyrenees”

The sport soon became a real obsession and took centre stage in Nicky’s life. “I will never forget the first time I flew,” she recalls. “To make a flight you basically need to run fast enough to get off a hill. I was concentrating so hard on running as fast as I could, that when I took that first jump, I didn’t actually realise right away that I was in the air! Then I landed and it was like I was in love, the most amazing experience. For me, it was the ultimate adrenalin rush and I became completely obsessed. I lived in Edinburgh for four years, obsessively watching the weather to see when I could catch a paragliding day.”

From her hut on the building site, Nicky would pray for good weather so that she could indulge in her new obsession. But Scotland is not known for its clear, dry weather – the ideal climate for paragliding – and Nicky was forced to look elsewhere, namely to Spain. Soon, she was using all her holidays for paragliding trips to Spanish destinations such as Alicante. She also began dreaming of a life in Spain, where she could practise her passion

on a full-time basis. It was through paragliding that Nicky was introduced to another passion – her boyfriend Mark – who also warmed to the idea of moving to Spain.

“I began to dream of a life where I could just glide all the time. We spent as much time off as possible, travelling to Spain where the climate is wonderful for flying. For me, to live in Spain and glide full-time was the ultimate dream, and one which kept me cheerful when stuck on a rainy building site in Scotland.”

Fate stepped in when Mark was offered a job in Barcelona. It was exactly the break they needed, and they jumped at the opportunity. The move would mean Nicky would give up her career as a quantity surveyor, something she had worked on for many years, but by now paragliding was her first priority. With the lower cost of living in Spain, the couple decided they could live on Mark’s salary alone and so they bought a home in La Floresta and decided to renovate the spare bedrooms for letting out to tourists.

Nicky flies regularly over Catalonia – four times a week – mainly over Girona and Àger but her favourite spot is Berga in the Spanish Pyrenees. The countryside that passes beneath her is made up of rolling green fields and orchards, dotted with sleepy Romanesque villages and patches of ancient woodland, all to the backdrop of the towering Pyrenees. Her quest for thermals also takes her further south to Alicante and further inland to Ávila near Madrid. Since taking up the sport five years ago, this active, energetic Englishwoman has earned a host of prestigious titles in the paragliding world. She’s currently ranked as the number two British female pilot and is female champion of Catalonia, the country she now regards as home. Last year she competed all over the world, in Australia – where she is female champion for the second year running – Brazil, France, Spain, Portugal, Greece and the Indian Himalayas.

After just one year in Spain, she entered the Catalan league of paragliders, where some 50

serious participants competed. It wasn’t long before she was very much part of the gliding scene in Catalonia and, despite the language barrier, she made good friends. The atmosphere among her fellow gliders is very friendly and sporting, which has helped her to feel welcome, she says.

When she came to Spain, Nicky didn’t know a word of Spanish, let alone any Catalan. Despite taking a few formal lessons through a private tutor, she has picked up the language simply through living and enjoying herself, but admits it’s been very frustrating at times not being able to communicate properly. “I know sometimes the other gliders are having a laugh and I am smiling along without comprehension – and they know I don’t understand! But I think they appreciate the effort made.”

In 2003, Nicky’s determination was rewarded when she became female champion of Catalonia. When she received her prize, which included bags of wine, olive oil, cheese, honey and almonds and other local goodies, she admits to feeling a bit strange about taking the Catalan title when actually she hails from Leicestershire. However, one of the judges cheerfully hugged her and reassured her, saying: “You are a true Catalan, because you chose our country.”

Buying a Spanish home though was not





Left and bottom

Nicky loves the forested countryside around her home in La Floresta, which is still only minutes from the centre of Barcelona; Nicky, after another safe landing

Head in the clouds



The dramatic landscape of north-west Catalonia provides an ideal setting for paragliding. Flat plains run north from the city of Lleida until they run head-on into the giant 3,000-foot, south-facing rock wall of the Sierra del Montsec massif, at the foot of the Pyrenees. The resulting thermals attract paragliders and ultra-light pilots from all over Spain. Most pilots converge around the village of Àger, near the popular take-off point of Sant Alís peak (1,678m), Montsec's highest point. There are several other take-off points around Àger all frequented by paragliding schools offering flying courses of different levels, from baptism flights right up to five-day intensive courses:

Volàger – 00 34 973 320 230; www.volager.com
 Entrenuvols – 00 34 973 455 099; www.entrenuvols.com
 Albatross – 00 34 973 455 222; www.albatros.es

Àger is also the take-off point for hot-air balloons: www.globuskontiki.com.
 The terrain around the Sierra del Montsec is just as enticing for those who prefer to keep their feet on terra firma. Fans of walking, caving, kayaking, climbing and mountain-biking will not be disappointed with a visit to the area; one favourite spot is the Congost de Mont-Rebei gorge at the western end of the range.

The best paragliding arguably in the whole of Spain can be had at Berga, a small Pyrenean town situated 100 kilometres north of Barcelona and just south of Andorra. Again, a number of outlets offer walking, horse-riding and mountain-biking trips in the surrounding countryside.

without its hiccups. “We had to go through the whole rignarole of buying in Spain, which is very different from back home. We wanted this house badly, it was affordable and something we could really develop.” Nicky and Mark’s poor command of Catalan proved a problem, as all official documentation is in the indigenous language, and their applications for development on the house have been unnecessarily lengthy due to this barrier. But, it becomes clear the move has been worth it, despite all the challenges involved, when Nicky describes her new home. “We have a lovely house surrounded by forests, yet a short drive from Barcelona. You actually can’t see our house without entering the forests, it is so secluded and I love that.”

This year has already seen Nicky successfully defend her title in Australia, and participated in the world championships in Brazil. She also holds the title of Himalayan and Caldeas Larouco open female champion and is currently seeking sponsors. While Nicky adores her life of travel

and “basically chasing the weather”, she insists she loves coming back to Spain, which truly feels like home to her. “Despite problems like the language, I can honestly say I feel more settled here than I ever have anywhere. I love having so much free time to simply spend with my paragliding buddies!”

Visits to the UK are rare since her family are always happy to visit her in Spain and she loves seeing her nieces, who have already displayed an enthusiasm for their aunt’s lifestyle. One of them, however, got into trouble at school and was accused, quite unfairly, of making up tales in class. Apparently, the child was claiming her aunty in Spain could fly; well, of course she can... 55

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Above and right
 Catalonia’s sleepy, ancient villages and green countryside are great for exploring from the air; Nicky and Mark live on the doorstep of the picturesque Pyrenees

