

House & Home**From big smoke to big skies**Cheryl Markosky SEPTEMBER 11, 2010

Undeterred by the recent earthquake in Christchurch, Clare Murray, Oxford University music graduate and former senior lawyer at global law firm Clifford Chance, is happy she waved goodbye to London and said hello to New Zealand. She lives and works in Christchurch as a director with her husband, Justin, managing director of their independent investment bank, Murray & Company (www.murrays.co.nz), and their three children, George, 10, Angus, eight, and Saskia, six.

Born and raised in Northumberland, north-east England, Murray sometimes feels as if she hasn't really moved far from home. Looking up at the big skies and undulating hills of nearby Cheviot and Loburn, she thinks parts of New Zealand are uncannily like her native county.

“Considering that I’ve travelled nearly 12,000 miles, it’s ironic that there are times I feel I’m almost back where I started.”

After meeting Justin at Oxford University, Murray sampled life in his home city of Christchurch on the east coast of New Zealand’s South Island, after she had finished her masters degree in music.

Yet the couple relocated at a difficult time. “It was 1990 and the recession meant it was hard to find jobs, so I worked in a shop during the day and took evening secretarial courses.” She found time to play for a top-division squash team, to captain a netball team and to play oboe in the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra.

She returned home to take a two-year law conversion course and won a contract with a London law firm. She deferred the job for a year, so that the couple could explore Wellington, where life is based around the busy harbour. It was, she says, “the perfect spot for a couple with no kids, as it has great restaurants and nightlife”.

Despite the easy Kiwi lifestyle, the couple were lured back to London, Clare working for a Chancery Lane law firm and Justin starting a career in investment banking. After two years in entertainment law and medical negligence litigation, Murray moved to Clifford Chance, where she worked in the field of corporate law.

“We had a flat in Kilburn and moved south to Wandsworth Common when we had the children. It wasn’t easy with three children under the age of four, clocking up long hours in the office and bringing home work to do once they were in bed.”

One of the pluses of living in London was their careers. “I remember Justin advising the Spanish government and me the government of Yamal-Nenets, an autonomous, gas-producing region of Russia.”

The main downside was cramped living space. But from a narrow four-bedroom terraced house with a tiny garden, they have now upgraded to a spacious five-bedroom house with a tennis court and pool in the heart of Christchurch, which cost about £500,000.

“Giving the children a freer, back-to-basics upbringing was our goal, and they’ve become independent earlier in a smaller city,” Murray says.

It was time for challenge at work too. Although she was happy at Chance, Murray knew creating the first investment bank on the South Island was a big attraction for Justin. Six years ago, they set it up with three divisions: corporate finance, wealth management and private equity.

Murray has also had to spend time settling her family, particularly George, who missed his London friends. “Technically, I’m only meant to be at the office until 3pm but I feel guilty when I’m not there. However, there isn’t much point having a really successful business but unhappy children.”

With work and home competing for her limited time, there are advantages in running her own company. “I can duck away to George’s poetry competition and Angus’s marimba classes, when possible. That would never have happened in London.”

Other freedoms include being on the slopes at Porters ski-field in just over an hour. “The kids know everyone. They click on their skis and go off on their own.”

The beaches are just 20 minutes away and they go to Lake Hawea every summer. Murray found that she’d turned into a Kiwi of sorts when she was frustrated spotting one other person on the lake. “I’ve come to love the solitude,” she says.

In keeping with New Zealand’s reputation as a place to enjoy the outdoors, Murray recently took part in a “relay” triathlon with her sisters-in-law. Murray ran 21km with the others each taking a swimming and cycling leg. But the arts scene is strong as well. There is the Court Theatre, a world-class art gallery, and a flourishing film industry. Murray chairs the Trust Board of the Christchurch Arts Festival Trust.

She does miss some European niceties, such as classic shoes. “The fashion business is very funky here but trying to track down an elegant pair of high heels can be tricky.”

She also hankers after British supermarkets, where presentation beats Kiwi functionality. Her mouth waters when she roams around a Waitrose supermarket back home. “There are some pockets of excellence – chocolateries, wine shops, cheesemongers and French farmers’ markets are becoming more evident – but many shopkeepers take the attitude, ‘This will do, so just get on with it.’ ”

One of the hardest parts of living literally on the other side of the world is being apart from friends and family. “I’m sad not to see my four godsons in the UK but I bet I’ll see a lot of them when they turn 18 and start to travel.”

Her sister Anne visits frequently and her piano-teacher mother Pauline owns the small house next door, where she spends six months of the year. “The children run through the hedge to visit her and she helps them practise their music, just like she did with me when I was growing up in Northumberland. It’s the best of both worlds.”

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