

Great escape



The *estrellas* (literally the 'stars') went on first to do a dance before the parade itself began. 'Don't leave me,' I begged them. 'I don't know what to do.' 'You don't have to do anything,' they laughed. 'Just ride the elephant.'

But there was still no sign of Luis and Hannibal. With a tremendous fanfare, the parade music burst through the loudspeakers. Dimly, half-blinded by my false eyelashes and nerves, I saw the performers file past me one by one through the stage curtain: Oly, Brissel and Karina in their feathered costumes; the six-year-old clown Tintin, Mara and her boyfriend Omar; tiny Olga; Yvonne the tightrope-walker; Martinelli the juggler; Antonino, the 'Master of Equilibrium'.

And then, finally, in the nick of time, there they were. Luis made the signal for Hannibal to kneel down, and then, with a quick leg-up, showed me how to climb up on to her back.

Suddenly, with a lurch, I was out there, drenched in blinding white lights, smiling, waving, squinting over Hannibal's head into the dark. 'KAT-TY...' I heard the ringmaster's voice announcing me, rolling his Rs, 'la g-rrr-inga est-rrr-ella.' *La gringa estrella*. The 'star' gringa.

I had only intended to ride in the evening parade once or twice, just to see what it was like, but there was something so compelling about being part of the performance that I went out the next night, and the next. Soon, no one bothered to ask me if I was taking part in the parade that day. Mundo even put me in his announcing tape. Riding Hannibal had become my act.

I went to the circus believing I would only ever be a spectator. But once I started to perform, my involvement became total. Everything I once thought or believed, everything I once was before I came to Circo Bell's was suspended; each day I found myself able to uncover new and finer layers of meaning.

The circus could be a brutal place, but at the same time, it proved to be a profound experience. Even now, hardly a week goes by when I do not think about my adopted circus family. My year in Mexico with Circo Bell's remains the most extraordinary, and joyful, of my life.

Travels With A Mexican Circus by Katie Hickman (Bloomsbury, £8.99)

'HOW I BECAME A MID-LIFE NOMAD'

With her daughter leaving home, **Jane Lovatt** decided to pack up her life into a rucksack and become a 'trundler'. Has she looked back? Not a chance

I am writing this on the

Coast Starlight train, which heads up the West Coast of America from Los Angeles to Seattle. Frequently when I travel, I am moved to tears by the world's wonders.

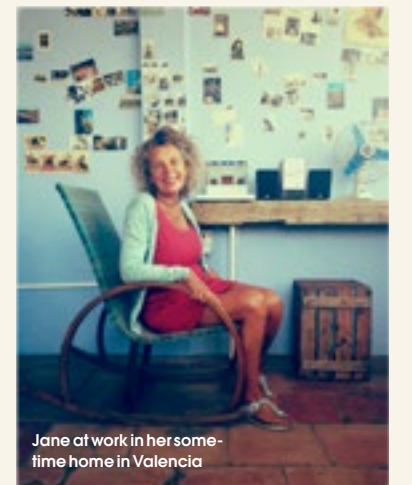
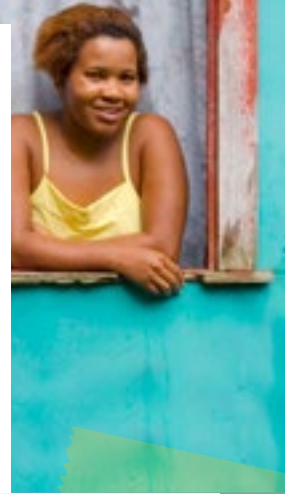
Today it's California's glorious long white-sand beaches and the rich blue Pacific Ocean that are making me well up. I feel very lucky and very grateful.

It's six years since I did a little farewell dance in my beloved London home, then locked the door for the last time. I had brought up my daughter Phoebe here until she left for university, but the moment had come to pick up my rucksack from where I'd parked it when I became a mum. I'd planned to just rent the flat out for a few months, but a determined buyer waved an irresistible amount of cash under my nose. Why not go the whole way and, aged 48, change my world completely?

I had always spent any not-so-spare funds on holidays and my work as a freelance travel writer had taken me to some incredible places. Aged 18, my plans to busk around Europe in a mime act were thwarted when my partner-in-mime bailed out. Another ambitious scheme to start a sustainable-tourism venture in Antigua had to be ditched when I discovered I was pregnant. Now I had my sights set on a new big adventure and this time, nothing would stop me.

It was also time to catch up with another important part of my life. Although my boyfriend Chris and I had been together for 17 years, we had always lived in separate single-parent households, he with his daughter and I with mine. Now we were ready to begin life as a full-time couple, and what better way to start than with a 10-week trip to Italy?

As we drove through idyllic French villages and past soaring Swiss mountains, I felt like we were on the run from reality >>



Jane at work in her sometime home in Valencia



'I realised I didn't need a home any more, just a phone'

"Working on the move was challenging but so liberating," says Jane, here on her way to Mandalay, Burma, on the Irrawaddy River; and far right, in Cienfuegos, Cuba

and I absolutely loved it. I had spare cash in the bank for the first time, our treasured girls seemed fine and I saw no reason why I couldn't carry on writing for a living. As we sped along the Autostrade del Sole, I was giddy with exhilaration.

Of course there was a touch of anxiety amidst my euphoria. Would I regret leaving London, my home for 30 years? Would Chris and I cope with being together all the time, rather than just three nights a week?

Our new base was a rustic house in northern Tuscany, rented through friends for a bargain €300 a month. From this rural retreat, we made frequent forays around the region - explored elegant medieval towns, swam in the Arno, picnicked in poppy fields and scoffed astonishing amounts of ice cream.

One night, in a tiny village near Pisa, we saw a statue of the Madonna being floated down the river as fireflies lit the way to a waiting pedestal. The next day, Our Lady was moved off her perch in favour of a huge TV screen on which, along with the rest of the village, we watched Italy play in the European Championship while feasting on melon and pizza.

I managed to file travel stories from hilltops and hotels - working on the move was challenging but so liberating. I had a lightbulb moment when I answered copy queries while basking on a sun-soaked rock in the Cinque Terre. As I watched luminous jellyfish swimming in the sea, I realised I didn't need a home any more, just a phone.

As we drove back to Britain, we were thrilled by the success of our trip and discussed our next move. We had adapted well to being together constantly, and the excitement of our travels had distracted us from potential domestic dilemmas. I revel in chaos while Chris is exceptionally tidy, but as we camped in France, rented apartments in Portugal and toured Spain by train, this seemed less important.

Occasionally we paused for breath. Chris had previously bought a derelict stable in Snowdonia and, while putting in

water and electricity, he installed a caravan in the garden, where I would hole up for a few weeks before my feet began to itch again. Fleeing the British winter was a priority. Chris wasn't sure about long-haul trips, but once he realised money spent feeding the Welsh log-burner could buy a ticket to the sun, we booked a flight to Panama.

We journeyed up the Central American isthmus on buses. My head throbbled as I used my poor Spanish to work out the timetables, but I was elated when latino reggae blasted

out from the bus sound system and the locals danced wildly at the back.

We swang in hammocks to the soundtrack of howler monkeys and admired giant iguanas in the Costa Rican rainforest. On the Corn Islands of Nicaragua, a young waiter was overjoyed when I gave him a phrase book, which he used to translate a dog-eared copy of *The Road Less Travelled*. He had been suffering from depression and, lacking other help, had turned to the book for solace. In humble admiration, I pledged to learn good Spanish, maybe even return to teach English one day.

Our most recent trip was to Burma. This exquisite country, with its emerald rice fields, purple limestone peaks and glistening gold statues, is the most spiritual place I have ever visited. Its people are also exceptionally beautiful, kind and welcoming. On the train to the mountain town of Kalaw we met a truly lovely couple who shared their cakes with us as we rattled past mango orchards and lush farmland. They invited us to their peaceful home for delicious fish curry, avocados picked from their garden and wonderful conversations about life in both countries.

They asked us about our favourite singers (Elton John or Cliff Richard?) and we showed them pictures of the Welsh stables and Christmas trees in London. We promised that one day we would meet again.

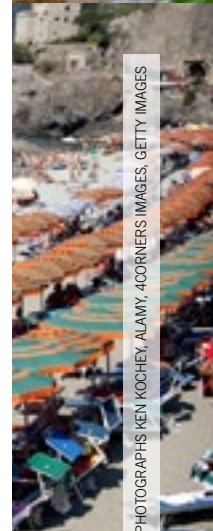
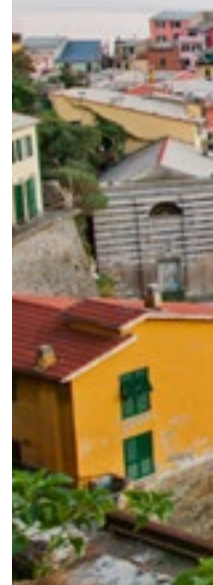
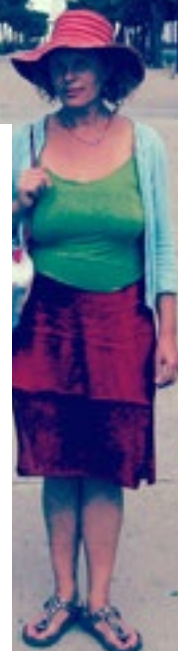
I can't imagine staying in one place now. Every January we set off for a far-flung spot for two months, with a budget of £2,500 each. We travel light, trundling our rucksacks on wheels. To my delight, I have become a 'trundler', living out of my trusty bag for much of the time. Not all the time, though. In November 2012, we visited Valencia, and ended up in the seaside district of El Cabanyal. I was captivated by its streets lined with tiled fishermen's houses and within a week I was making an offer on a crumbling, sunny flat, where we plan to spend many months each year.

I have no regrets about changing my life. These last six years have been so amazing, packed with joyous memories. I feel far more confident, far more my true self than before, and Chris and I have grown so much closer than if we had simply moved in together. Rather than being an empty-nester, my time as a mid-life nomad has been unbelievably rich and full. 📍

Read more of Jane's adventures at thetrundlers.com



Jane on the bus in Panama



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