

Life's a beach for the Berg family, pictured at home in Noordhoek



# 'HOW WE CHANGED OUR LIVES'

Many of us dream of making a fresh start, but what are the realities when we do? Former fashion editor Sally Berg, 42, tells Lisa Grainger about her family's amazing journey from full-on life in London to a chilled yet deeply rewarding existence near Cape Town

PHOTOGRAPH BY NIKKI RIXON

**W**E WERE DRIVING ALONG THE COAST ROAD FROM CAPE TOWN WHEN I SAW THE LITTLE BEACH TOWN OF NOORDHOEK FOR THE FIRST TIME. I looked up at the mountain soaring into the blue skies and down over those long, white empty beaches, and thought, 'This is my spiritual home.' It was an epiphany. That night I phoned my husband, back in London, from my fashion-shoot location in Cape Town and told him we were moving homes – and countries – with our year-old son Lorcan.

Although our life seemed glamorous – with lots of fashion parties, front-row seats at catwalk shows, and trips to Milan and Paris – it was unbelievably stressful. We both had to work so hard to maintain our lifestyle that I didn't feel I had time to do anything properly: I wasn't a good mum, wife or stylist. I felt like an octopus being pulled apart. We lived in a cramped semi that always looked untidy. The ►



Clockwise from above left: the couple and their dream house; Sally and friend Sam with SJP, and with Helena Christensen



◀ hallway was full of Al's photographic equipment, while the front room was rammed with clothes I'd called in for a fashion shoot. Then there were Lorcan's toys everywhere. Life was constantly hectic; Al often worked until 3am so he could look after the baby one day a week, and I had to juggle changing nappies with trying to organise shoots, clean the house and cook the dinner. It felt as though things were spiralling out of control. All we could do at weekends was recover. The lowest point came one midnight when I was on my knees loading the dishwasher, tears pouring down my face, thinking 'I can't do this any more. I'm going to have a nervous breakdown.'

Thankfully, Al and I have always been good communicators. We talk through whatever's going on and the more we talked, the more we realised that, if we were going to live the life we really wanted, it would have to be outside London. We thought about Cornwall, but had neither the patience for commuting, nor the money to buy a nice country house. We'd never really considered

## 'WE SET UP A BUSINESS, BUILT A HOUSE AND HAD A BABY, ALL IN A YEAR'

moving abroad – and I'd certainly never considered South Africa because it gets such bad press about racism.

But when I arrived in Cape Town for a fashion shoot in October 2002, I found it impossible not to be seduced. With all its light and space, Noordhoek couldn't have been further from where we lived in northwest London. Within a couple of days I thought, 'This is it. We could get our city fix and live on a beach only half an hour away. We could live an exciting multicultural life and flit back to the UK on an overnight flight. Bingo!'

Al and I talked it over, and our decision came pretty easily. In May 2003, he flew to Cape Town and bought a plot of land. And a year later – having worked our socks off to save money, arrange for our house to be rented, and pack up – we moved.

At first we lived in a rented house while we waited for our own to be built, and within a year of moving we had built our dream house. Looking back on how much we did in that year, I'm grateful that we had the 'London energy' we had; now we're chilled-out Capetonians I can't imagine moving to a foreign country, then starting up a business, building a house and having a baby all in the space of a year. People thought we were nuts.

Dylan, our second son, was a complete surprise. I had a polyp removed from my uterus and London specialists had told me that we were unlikely to be able to conceive another child naturally. But once we'd moved we had less stress and

started eating better and, suddenly, there he was: our miracle baby. As for building our dream home from scratch, I think it helped that we knew exactly what we wanted. We showed our ideas from magazine articles to a brilliant local architect, Bert Pepler, who then created exactly what we wanted: a house that's really open and modern. The entire project – buying the land and building our house one road back from the beach – came in at under £250,00, which we funded from the sale of our London house.

Our eight-year-old son attends a Rudolf Steiner school, which is run on 'the more you put into life the more you get out of it' lines. Recently some of the school buildings were burned down by arsonists, but rather than get depressed or try to raise money that people didn't have, the parents decided to get together and rebuild it themselves. It was really heartwarming. But then the parents here are very involved in their children's lives; it's not like London where you're forced to just drop them off on your way to work.

School finishes at 12.30pm, so we see a lot of the kids. I'll make soup for lunch, with vegetables from Al's organic patch, and lots of fruit, or I'll make a cake – and then we'll go to the beach, or play in the garden. The boys are always barefoot; just seeing them run around the lawn with the dog, wearing shorts and beads around their necks, makes me smile. It's such a lovely way for children to grow up. Of course, it isn't all a bed of roses. ►



Sally lending a hand at the local township crèche, left, and, below, with her younger son, Dylan



◀ These past three years have been among the hardest of my life, because there's been so much to deal with on all fronts – emotional, financial and practical. When I first had Dylan, who's now two and a half, I don't think I've ever cried so much. The house wasn't finished and I was surrounded by builders. We didn't have any friends and we were a continent away from our family. But we knew that to get what we wanted wouldn't be easy, and would take time. Luckily, we kept our sense of humour or there might have been a divorce.

The most shocking thing about living here has been the poverty that most people live in. In spite of the progress following Nelson Mandela's presidency and post-apartheid politics, the gulf between rich and poor and between the races is vast. There really doesn't seem to be any common ground. Being faced by desperate people every day tore my heart out. It made us realise that in order to live this beautiful life, we had to get involved in the community and township life, and offer skills that might help people move on.

Sometimes I take my two boys into the local township crèche at Masiphumelele where I teach about 30 under-sixes on a voluntary basis. I think it's good for them to see, plus it's so much fun to be a part of the energy and colour and life there. I got involved when mothers at school started a voluntary organisation called Work for Love, which is about sharing skills that might benefit others. Discovering alternative ways of living

has been such an amazing learning experience for us. It takes a while to stop living for money, and worrying about things, and to start concentrating on the good things in life. But it can work. Now, instead of working apart, Al and I work together creating stock shots for a picture agency. And he has started a photographic group in the townships (see below). We've become vegetarian, too, which has made us feel much healthier. I've also been to see a therapist after a difficult relationship with my father left me with

a lot of insecurities about myself. And I attend art classes twice a week for four hours, which I absolutely love. My paintings and sculptures are on display all over the house. What we've done, I think, is make our lives quieter, more loving, and so much happier. Lorcan adores his school, and is blossoming as a result of all the creative input and nurturing. Al and I can't believe we live in our dream house right on a beach and still do work we love, with beautiful people and in amazing locations.

In the process, we've become stronger as individuals, as a couple and as a family. What's wonderful now is that I feel I am slowly becoming the woman I want to be; I'm proud of myself, I'm proud of Al, and I'm proud of what we've achieved and become. I miss my mum, and it would be nice to see family more, but we've made fantastic, really close friends here. And I've grown to feel South Africa's my home. I can honestly say I'd never want to leave. There's too much to do and give. ■  
*For more information about Work for Love and to help them empower poor communities in South Africa, contact [marieclaire.co.uk/workforlove](http://marieclaire.co.uk/workforlove)*

## FOCUSING ON THE TOWNSHIPS

In London, Alistair Berg worked on ad campaigns for Nike, Reebok and Vodaphone, as well as shooting portraits of celebrities such as David Beckham and Ronaldinho.

Realising that most images of black people in South Africa were by European photographers, he set up the township-based photography group Iliso Labantu (the eye of the people), with an American photographer, Sue Johnston. They lend cameras to local people, helping them to mount exhibitions and set up a weekly meeting in a downtown space for which Al pays, so they can

work, learn about photography and make greetings cards to sell. One woman, 34-year-old Lulekwa Mbadamane, now feeds her family with the proceeds of the photo card sales. Another, 39-year-old Lindeka Qampi, with three children to support, has sold her photos to a big South African bank, and has upcoming exhibitions in Sydney and Brussels. 'People in the townships ask me to take their picture because they know I am a photographer,' she says proudly. Community exhibitions help to bring the



photographers recognition as well as giving local people a view of their own lives. 'I go to places most white South Africans never see, and help people to have pride in what they're doing,' says Al. 'Plus, I've helped them create a little business that keeps them going. It's these things that make life worthwhile.'  
*For more information, visit [ilisolabantu.org](http://ilisolabantu.org)*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANDLA MNYAKAMA