



# business & pleasure

Hankering after the good life, and seeing the potential in a coastal enterprise, these couples took the plunge and have never looked back

PHOTOGRAPHY DAVE YOUNG WORDS LESLEY GILLILAN



## tunnels beaches, ilfracombe

### Jamie and Zoe McIntock

A common after-effect of taking a British seaside holiday is a burning desire to give up everything for a new life on the coast. But then reality kicks in. No matter how much you want to turn your holiday romance into a permanent relationship, you can't live on fresh air. Even if the sell-one-buy-another housing equation works in your favour, how do you make a living in, say, Padstow or Penzance? Fishing, perhaps? I don't think so.

One way of making the move is to buy a seaside business – preferably a 'lifestyle business' (as in a home with an attached income or a business with an integral home). Popular choices include tourist-related enterprises such as guest houses and hotels, restaurants, cafés and tea rooms, gift shops, galleries, private tourist attractions or even village post offices.

None of these options will provide an easy life or a vast income, and there are risks involved; not everyone, after all, has the stamina or the disposition for self-employment or the flair and imagination to turn a tired business into a thriving concern. Indeed, many ill-considered new businesses end in failure.

With the trend for turning chintzy old guest houses into boutique hotels, or greasy caffs into foodie beach restaurants, there are, however, plenty of seaside opportunities for the enterprising novice. Just remember that running a seasonal business is no holiday. Summer may be over by the time you get a chance to enjoy that dream beach.

Three years after buying the 'Tunnels Beaches', a run-down seaside tourist attraction in Ilfracombe, Jamie and Zoe McIntock still find it difficult to explain exactly what it is they do. 'Sometimes I just tell people we work in design and marketing,' says Zoe. 'It's easier than saying we run a private beach with four cliff tunnels and a Victorian tidal pool.'

Zoe is, in fact, a designer. Or at least that's what she did before she and Jamie decided to move back to their north-Devon home town for a new life in tourism. They were looking for new jobs in the area when they stumbled across the sale of the Tunnels Beaches. Open to the public since 1823, it was offered with one-and-a-half miles of rocky coastline, a scruffy visitor centre and planning permission for a cliff-top bungalow. And though it had been on the market for years (and the books suggested a poor return), the McIntocks were smitten. We were excited by its potential,' says Zoe, 'and even attracted by the amount of work involved.'

The couple spent the first year, and a lot of money, redeveloping their unique business. 'It was very hands-on,' says Jamie, who combined building, landscaping and lifeguarding with researching, and writing a history of the Tunnels Beaches, which has enabled

the McIntocks to add a new wet-weather element to the centre. 'Now it's a beach with a seaside museum,' says Jamie.

The McIntocks' income comes from a combination of elements: the entrance fee (£1.75 per person), the 'flip-flop' gift shop, wet-suit and deck chair hire, ice creams and the new Café Blue Bar. 'The cafe now takes nearly twice as much as the whole business used to take,' says Zoe. In total, the couple have multiplied the business's turnover by five. They have also improved disabled access, won Blue Flag status for the beach (as well as a Loo of the Year award), added picnic and play areas and, while currently living in rented accommodation, they are building a house on the cliff for themselves and their young family (a second baby is on the way).

Needless to say, the key to their success is in good design and marketing. 'So much design needed doing,' says Zoe. 'The website, the posters, the leaflets – it was great because I was doing my job for our business instead of someone else's. It has enabled us to bring up our children by the sea, and we also have the time to do what we were trained to do.' *The Tunnels Beaches, Bath Place, Ilfracombe, Devon EX34 8AN, 01271 879882; www.tunnelsbeaches.co.uk.*



**THIS PAGE** Jamie and Zoe McIntock have transformed the Tunnels Beaches into an exciting attraction and multiplied its turnover by five **OPPOSITE** The caves and rocky coastline at Ilfracombe is packed with history, so much that Jamie has written about it and incorporated that into a museum