

Our Summer of transformation

From the romance of a mesmerising sunset to the thrill of discovering something new, these three women show that when we expand our horizons, amazing things can happen...

Fresh perspectives (from left):
Lynn Hedgecoe, Sarah Williams
and Sarah Payne share their
voyages of self-discovery



PHOTOGRAPHY
KATIE THOMPSON



'My holiday romance has never ended'

Reeling from a painful divorce, Sarah Williams, 38, went abroad to work and find a new direction. But she found much more than she expected...

Two years ago I needed to change my life. I'd recently divorced and felt like I was back at square one - I had no partner, no children and no home. I signed up to a course called Restored Lives, which helps people to recover after a marriage has broken down, and what I learnt helped me to let go of my pain and anger. I began to see that even though the future I'd planned had been taken away from me, in its place I'd been given the freedom to do something extraordinary.

When I learnt that a friend was working in South Sudan on a project organising health provision, I realised this could be the incredible experience I was looking for. I was certain the skills from my job as a social worker could help and the project organisers agreed. I handed in my notice at work, packed my life up and put it in storage. It was daunting, but I had the feeling that being a bit scared was just what I needed.

In June 2012 I landed in the capital, Dubai, and I felt about as far away from my old life in the UK as it was possible to be. I made friends with my new colleagues, sharing rice and beans in the shade while watching a big monkey strolling around. I flew out to the bush in little one-engine planes, touching down on mud airstrips where chickens and goats would run up, and the children in the village would come out to meet us. I joined in at the village jamboree, singing and dancing until dusk. I'd felt so lonely in my marriage, but now that I was alone, I felt strangely connected to everyone around me, self-sufficient and with confidence to talk to strangers.

That August I decided to travel down to South Africa on a group tour. At Cape Point, the southern-most tip of Africa, I stood on the craggy cliff and inhaled the views and all the possibilities that came with this

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incredible trip. There was a man in the group I felt a special connection with: Hugo. We'd sit next to each other on the bus and at dinner, and stay up chatting, sharing a bottle of wine and enjoying the magic of a warm Summer evening. I was drawn to him, fascinated by what he had to say about history and politics, and I knew my new-found independence and openness was attracting him, too. I felt like a butterfly coming out of my chrysalis.

We swapped email addresses at the end

of our trip, and I flew back to South Sudan and Hugo to his home in London, but we wrote to each other often. When I moved back to the UK in December, we went on our first date, to the ballet at Covent Garden. Seeing him again was electric. Soon we began a relationship and fell in love. Now I know Hugo is my best friend, the man I will spend the rest of my life with. We're getting married on Midsummer's Day. Our love began during that enchanted African Summer, and it feels right to be embarking on our new adventure together, with the sunshine warming us from the inside out.

'I felt like a butterfly coming out of my chrysalis,' says Sarah Williams



FOR INFORMATION ABOUT RESTORED LIVES, VISIT WWW.HTB.ORG.UK/RESTORED-LIVES

'I bonded with my daughter in an underwater world'

You don't have to go abroad to experience the thrill of losing yourself in an exotic paradise. Under the sea, Sarah Payne, 53, and her daughter, Rosie, learnt a new skill together and rediscovered their bond

There was a gentle breeze and the sea was calm, deep blue and sparkling in the sunlight. We were on our way to my favourite diving spot in Devon when I heard my daughter Rosie gasp, and turned to see a family of dolphins behind our boat, playfully showing off their skills, jumping up and arching in the air, the sunshine turning their silver skin to gold. Rosie and I threw our arms around each other and hugged in excitement, as they dived back into the blue.

Rosie is the eldest of my three daughters, and we've always been incredibly close, but when she was away at university a distance grew between us. She made new friends and discovered a whole other world that had nothing to do with me. It is what you'd expect at that stage, but I felt like I was losing her. So when she graduated and moved back home, I wanted us to find that closeness again. When a friend told me how much fun she'd had scuba diving, I suggested to Rosie that we sign up for a local course run by the British Sub-Aqua Club.

We had one class a week, and spent a few months learning about the equipment and techniques. Then, as the Summer began, we took the first of hundreds of trips to explore an underwater universe. A small group of us took a boat out from the coast in Plymouth until all we could see was sandstone cliffs and open sea, peaceful and still in the sunshine. I was more excited than nervous, as everyone had their own dive buddy - a more experienced diver to make sure nothing went wrong. We checked our equipment, then Rosie and I dropped backwards over the boat together, and a whole new world opened up to us.

All I could hear was the rhythmic sound of my breath, and I felt an extraordinary sense of calm as I sank down below the

'We saw coral and sea anemones like jewels - I never knew England was so stunning'
BAGGAGE TAG ✈️

surface. On the seabed were beautiful rock formations, speckled with white, orange and pink coral. I saw bright red-cushioned starfish, and gold, green and purple molluscs on rocks. Incredible spiky urchins of all shapes and sizes were all around me, and fluorescent sea anemones like jewels.

I had no idea that England could be this stunning - not dark and murky, but bright and colourful. And I learnt to see my daughter in a new way, too. We bonded over our new-found passion, shopping for equipment and studying together, and going diving every Sunday. Once we'd grown more experienced, Rosie became my

diving buddy, and I developed enormous respect for the intelligent, kind person that my daughter had become.

We still go on diving trips together, and Rosie has also joined another club and made new friends, too. She's moved out of home, found a career and a busy social life, and things are taking their natural course. I know that at 26 she doesn't need me as much any more, but I am so proud of the young woman she's become, and I treasure the memories we formed that Summer. Wherever life takes us, we will always come together to dive, and to reconnect under the sea.

'I felt an extraordinary sense of calm below the surface of the water,' says Sarah Payne



SARAH WILLIAMS (WEARS (OPENING PAGE); TOP: HOBBS; JEANS: MASSIMO DUTTI; SANDALS: MARKS & SPENCER; NECKLACE: MINT VELVET; BRACELET: PANDORA; SARAH PAYNE (WEARS (OPENING PAGE); TOP: MARKS & SPENCER; JEANS: ISME; SANDALS: MINT VELVET; NECKLACE: MARKS & SPENCER; BRACELETS: PANDORA)

'On that holiday, I got my life back'

When she was diagnosed with a rare heart condition, Lynn Hedgcock, 62, thought she'd never travel again. But a heroic journey proved her wrong

In Winter 2007 I had what I thought was a bad chest infection, and antibiotics didn't help. I spent New Year's Eve in hospital, and the next day – when I expected to go home – I was told I had a heart condition called cardiomyopathy. It would shorten my life and mean I'd never work again. Holding my first grandchild, having a long career, spending retirement travelling with my husband – all my hopes vanished with the consultant as he drew the curtain closed behind him.

I was in shock, and very afraid about what my life would become. I went from working 60-hour weeks as M&S Bank's head of HR, to struggling to walk up the stairs. I fought to focus on my blessings – a very happy marriage, two great kids, now in their 20s and 30s – but my soul ached when I thought about my favourite place. My husband, John, and I had bought our dream villa in Turkey a couple of years earlier and hadn't even finished doing it up. Now, because I couldn't fly, it looked like I was never going to see it again. But John refused to give in so easily. He said the four words that gave me my life back: we can do this.

He believed it, so I believed it, and I spent the next few months plotting how to get from our home in Cheshire to Turkey without EasyJet. My computer became my lifeline – in the past, my PA had set everything up, but planning the 15 legs of our journey and booking all the tickets gave me a project to focus on, and it was a form of therapy. When we finally left our home the following June, with a much smaller suitcase than I was used to, I felt excited and nervous, like a real adventurer setting off into the unknown.

It was a truly epic voyage. We travelled by train from Crewe via London to Paris, then through Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Hungary, Romania and on to Istanbul. We



'John refused to give in and told me, we can do this,' says Lynn Hedgcock

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then went by boat past Troy, finally ending up in our villa in Kalkan one week later. We spent hours watching the

scenery pass us by, from the pretty chalets in Switzerland to the rustic cottages of Romania. We people-watched, listened to the different languages, and shared a quiet celebration as we made each connection and arrived at the next destination.

John did everything for me, and every time he carried my suitcase, I felt our bond grow deeper and stronger. One night on the train while he was sleeping on the bunk above me, I sat cross legged on my bed looking out into the dark night sky, dotted with pinpricks of light, and I wept with gratitude for life and all its beauty, for the joy of being on a magical trip with the man I love.

When we finally arrived, we shared a bottle of Champagne on the patio. We drank in the views of the mountains and sea all around, and fell silent at the sight of the

quiet bay below us, bathed in Turkey's unique silvery, misty light that I thought I'd never see again. We watched the sun go down like an enormous ball sinking into the ocean, and felt like the luckiest people on earth.

For two weeks the sun re-energised me, and gave me the optimism to focus on what I could do, not what I couldn't. I decided to throw myself into raising funds and awareness for the Cardiomyopathy Association, a wonderful organisation that provided information and hope to me in my darkest days. I saw that if I could plan a trip like this, perhaps I could be useful – I could use the skills I'd honed in my career. Now I mentor people who've been diagnosed with the condition, and coordinate a campaign, The Great Pancake Party, which this year raised almost £20,000. Next year I'm determined we'll raise £50,000. I hope I will hold my first grandchild, but I know there is so much I can do with the time I have left. Whenever I feel low, I remember the Turkish sun on my skin and I feel truly grateful for the life and love I have. ◻

INTERVIEWS: MOYA SARNER; HAIR: PETROS MAIROUDHIOU AT TREVOR SORRIB; MAKE-UP: LIZ KITCHNER AT TERESA FARMINER; STORAGE TRUNKS: ARTIFICIAL ROSE BUSH AND ARTIFICIAL LAVENDER IN POT; ALL JOHN LEWIS; FALUX MINIATURE RED AND WHITE ROSE BUSHES; OKA; LYNN WEARS (OPENING PAGE): TOP: WALLIS; TROUSERS, MARKS & SPENCER; SANDALS: JONES; NECKLACE, WALLIS; BRACELETS: PANDORA; THIS PAGE: DRESS: GERARD DAREL AT JOHN LEWIS; JEWELLERY: HER OWN; GET INVOLVED IN THE GREAT PANCAKE PARTY AT GREATPANCAKEPARTY.CO.UK