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We moved to Wales and bought a holiday home — and alpacas

Alison Gillow and Daniel Fishel escaped London to live in a property in the ‘middle of nowhere’ with a barn, a cottage and furry friends



Alison Gillow and Daniel Fishel with their alpacas

Ruth Bloomfield
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When I decided not only to move to Wales but to the middle of nowhere in Wales, all my friends said I was crazy (*says Alison Gillow, 59*).

But even when I was living in London running my property management business, I would always escape at weekends to go sailing. I always dreamt of having a farmhouse and animals but it was too spooky to do on my own.

I met Daniel (Fishel, 67) on a dating website in March 2013. After three years we were talking about how we were going to merge our lives. My flat in Belsize Park, north London, was not big enough and I didn't want to move out to Bounds Green, where he had a two-bedroom house he shared with his son Joel (now 29). We sat down with Joel, who was then at university, and he said: "Don't worry about me: I'mgoing travelling for at least two years."



The couple at their new home in Betws Gwerfil Goch

It made sense for Daniel to sell his house. I had a two-bedroom flat I rented out that I could sell, and we could spend the week in Belsize Park and buy a holiday home outside London to spend weekends in.

We started looking south. We looked all over the place: Kent, Essex, Dorset. I had £400,000 from my flat and Daniel had £100,000, but everything was so expensive that we were looking at small pretty cottages. We wanted a big house.

• **‘We left our Essex housing estate for a lochside life in Scotland’**

We spent Christmas 2015 at a B&B in north Wales — Daniel’s family are in Liverpool, not far away — and I just said: “It makes sense for us to have a lovely holiday home here.” He had been waiting for me to say it.

In August 2016 we bought a three-bedroom house, which we think was built in the 19th century. It is in the village of Betws Gwerfil Goch and came with a little cottage in the garden, a barn and 5.5 acres. It cost me £400,000 and Daniel used his money to buy a holiday let in a nearby village.



Alison paid £400,000 for the property, while Daniel used some of his savings to buy a holiday let in a nearby village

Daniel was tutoring face to face at the time and I was running my business with an office in Primrose Hill, in London. The plan was that we would gently retire into the house and go up for weekends. “It was kind of working until one morning Daniel said he didn’t want to go back to London any more because he loved it in Wales. That had not been the plan, but I left him there. It wasn’t the end of the world. He was transitioning into tutoring online and was making a nice income.

What changed for me was Covid. I look after very high value rentals and when there was a problem I would go round with a plumber or roofer or electrician and get the work done while the tenants were at work. But lockdown was looming and Boris Johnson was talking about not being able to travel. I went to my office and packed everything into the car except for the desk and my chair and we had the most blissful lockdown.

After the two years it became very clear that if I could train my tenants to be at home when workmen came, I could build an office in the garden and go to work there.

We call ourselves accidental holiday cottage entrepreneurs (alidan.co.uk). When we bought the house we thought we may as well rent out the cottage. Then Daniel bought his house and started renting that on Airbnb. Then the house next door from ours — a four-bedroom eco-house with solar panels, a heat pump and a well — came up for sale. We were mortgaged up to the hilt and the only way we could buy it was to raid our premium bonds; Daniel took out a mortgage on his house too. We set up a limited company and each put in £50,000 to buy it, with a £320,000 mortgage. At first our payments were £867 per calendar month, which was fine, but our mortgage is a tracker and now they are up to £1,500 pcm. We are not making any money but it is covering its costs. I think that in time I will sell our house and we will live in it when we retire.

As well as renting out the houses, the local farmer rents our field. Daniel has trained as a mindfulness and meditation teacher and we have had some retreats as a venue for other facilitators.



The couple bought three alpacas (Ned, Toffee and Griffin) after “falling in love” with the animals on a visit to a neighbouring farm

I have always loved animals. In 2017 we adopted a feral cat, Dibble, who had been found in a barn. Then in 2018 we got Barney, a springer spaniel. We got a second cat during lockdown after my pet-sitter put something on Facebook saying there was a feral kitten needing a home. He is called Yogi.

At the front of our house we have a big sloping section of garden. It looks messy — we could never get the lawnmower down there. We asked the farmer if we could borrow a couple of sheep and he gave us a mum with twins for the summer. A couple of years later we had Timothy, an orphan lamb we kept until he became too big.

After Timothy left I went to a Women's Institute meeting because that is what you do when you move to the country.

We had a talk by a chap who breeds alpacas. We visited his farm and I just fell in love. Alpacas are a herd animal; for their sense of security you need to have at least three. In March 2023 we got Griffin, Ned and Toffee.

The first thing I had to do was spend £5,000 on new fencing. I visit them at lunchtime to feed them, talk to them and check them. They get a fibre feed and vitamin D paste in the winter and I have to do a daily body score to make sure they aren't losing weight. We have had them trained so that they can be harnessed and taken for walks. I have to cut their toenails every three to six months, and once a year they have to be sheared by a professional.

Apart from that, they are not high maintenance. They are very inquisitive — if you stand still they will come over to you and stare at you. But they are not animals that like to be petted.