



## A design for Life

John Hooks speaks to a Scottish couple who made the unlikely shift from the world of fashion design in London, to running a hugely successful internet property business in rural Tuscany

**F**iona McCardle and Jim Andrew have few opportunities these days to wear the knitwear they once designed for a living. That's largely due to the fact that woolly jumpers can be impractical when you are running one of the most visited villa rental internet sites in the world, whilst enjoying life by the pool under the baking Tuscan sun.

Originally from Scotland (Fiona from Stirling and Jim from Airdrie), the couple moved to Italy 14 years ago, after their lives had been turned upside down at home. Life had been good for them in Britain. After years of study and hard work, they owned their own successful knitwear design studio, which they operated from a warehouse on the banks of the River Thames in London. However, the good times weren't to last long, as factories up and down the country went to the wall as the textile industry suffered a major crisis, due to competition from abroad.

"This was a very difficult time for the both of us, as we really didn't know what to do. With the way things were looking in the industry, we were seriously staring unemployment in the face," explains Fiona. "We had both fallen in love with Italy through visiting the country with work and decided we had nothing to lose by uprooting and moving."

The young couple moved to Milan during the 1990 World Cup and settled in a flat just a corner kick from the magnificent San Siro football stadium, which had just been upgraded for the tournament. Although they loved the cosmopolitan buzz of fashion capital Milan, the couple had always dreamt of living in the countryside, and decided to move to Tuscany in 1992.

In the early days, they took a number of jobs so they could get by, but at this stage they certainly weren't living *La Dolce Vita*. "My first job was teaching English to students in a local language school," says Jim. "I was told not to speak Italian during my classes, which was lucky as at that stage I could only manage a couple of words. Over time, we both learned the language, which made settling into the country so much easier."

### Learning the language:

"I did a few months of evening classes in the UK but Fiona didn't know a word when she arrived. She went knocking on designers' doors in Milan looking for work. She eventually found some in a design studio and at first her friend had to mime to her when it was time for lunch. With time and practice we learned though. I'd say it took me about two years before I could speak it fluently."