

# SOPHIA MOSE

## THE EXPAT ROAD TO PROVENCE

BY CAROLYNE KAUSER-ABBOTT

As a serial expat, Dutch-born Sophia van Woensel-Mose has not lived in Holland since 1991. With a passion for languages and diverse cultures, her dream was to work at the United Nations so that she could travel. Her studies and work have taken her to the Caribbean, the United States, the United Kingdom, and now to southern France. If such a thing existed, Sophia would have long ago earned the title ‘Professional Expat’.

Born in Holland, Sophia studied law at Leiden University in The Hague and obtained a Master’s degree with a specialty in public international law. With her freshly minted degree in hand, Sophia headed straight to the Dutch Antilles island of St. Maarten as an associate of a Netherlands-based legal firm. Her opportunity to backfill an opening left by a senior lawyer was meant to be a six-month assignment. Her subsequent two years on the island focused on litigation, commercial and pro bono criminal law, and she was enlightened as to how the law really works – or does not – in the Caribbean. She was sworn into the Netherlands Antilles Bar in Curacao and a week later was working on a rape trial. During Sophia’s stint in St. Maarten she had no time to reflect on her expat status, but then again there were few genuine islanders.

Two years on a small island was enough for Sophia, so she left behind her friends and clients. Now interested in the Anglo-American legal system, Sophia applied and was accepted at Duke University’s School of Law, in Durham, North Carolina. Originally planning to obtain her post-graduate Master of Laws (LLM) in the U.S., which would put her one step closer to the New York Bar and possibly a stepping stone away from her dream of working at the United Nations, Sophia, never the underachiever, stayed a full three years at Duke, achieving her Juris Doctor (JD) degree in 1996.

Sophia’s initial adjustment period to North Carolina was brief; she always felt welcomed and never out of place. Although the transition



from a small island where you knew everyone to a big university surrounded by so many people was at first overwhelming, at Duke almost everyone was from somewhere else – either a foreign country or elsewhere in America. No one was really a ‘local’. With the sense that you were an expat among expats, the transition was made easier. Sophia met her future husband, Greg, during her first year in the Duke Law program and admits that this may have had something to do with her decision to stay the couple extra years and achieve her JD degree.

After graduation, Sophia headed to New York City to put her legal degrees into practice at Dewey & LeBoeuf LLP. She says that Manhattan felt more like home than anywhere else she has lived, largely because of the attitude that no one is a foreigner, essentially making everyone a New Yorker. It was easy for her to fit into the pool of young lawyers, as everyone had the same status – they all worked practically 24/7. Sophia admits there were only a few times in two years when she felt she like she was culturally different from her American colleagues. It was in those moments that she felt like an expat and wanted to run home to her family and friends.

Sophia’s American husband was not interested in New York City, so after he graduated he headed to West Africa where he worked as a refugee lawyer with the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR). After his contract term was finished in Africa, Greg did not wish to return to America, and there was an opportunity for Sophia to relocate with her firm. They reunited in London, England, which seemed like a perfect geographic compromise with its endless opportunities for two bright, young lawyers. The surprise for Sophia was that, despite her prior knowledge of London, it did not feel like home; this was a shock as she was so much closer to where she had grown up. Surrounded by all British colleagues, Sophia felt more like a foreigner than anywhere else she had ever lived. It was strange to feel out of place yet be so close to your native land.

After two years, Sophia took a position as in-house counsel at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). At the turn of the millennium, this was an exciting, albeit stressful, place to work. It was not long after their son was born that Sophia and her husband decided that life in the U.K., and particularly, in her case, work as a lawyer, was not providing any work-life balance. They decided that while their son was still young it was time to make both a physical move and a mental switch. Rather than move to the English countryside and endure long commutes into the city, in 2005 the family moved to rural France. As Sophia puts it, “Goodbye legal jobs and personal assistants; hello French rural life and hard manual labor.” They moved to the Lot in France’s southwest, to a village of 400 inhabitants – a vast contrast from London’s millions.

Sophia and Greg bought a medieval farmhouse that was at one time a country hotel, and, after extensive renovations, they created three comfortable holiday cottages suitable for child-friendly holidays. Sophia and her husband understood well enough the profile of their clientele: stressed-out executives in need of a safe and bucolic holiday with calming pastoral views. They called it *Domaine de la Dolce*.

To prepare the cottages in time for their first season required nearly super-human efforts. Sophia says she quickly became versed in the necessary construction lingo so she could converse with local artisans and tradespeople. The couple hung up their business suits and rolled up their sleeves, doing much of the manual labor themselves, which included everything from stripping wallpaper to painting, demolition, sewing curtains, cutting down trees... and creating a website. Sophia believes that the fact that they both spoke French helped with their integration process, but fortunately the local community was welcoming and they made friends quickly. Their three-year old son was immersed in a



This south-facing stone house is part of an 18th-century ‘Relais de Poste’ in south Luberon, Provence.

small French-only nursery school.

From the moment they arrived in their new village they worked hard to make the main house habitable and the cottages ready for their first visitors. There was hardly any time to reflect on whether or not they fit in. Whether it was the ‘magic’ of the small village, or the family’s attitude towards their new environment, they felt fully integrated and part of the community.

Rural life in France means looking out for your neighbors. For Sophia and Greg this meant ensuring that their elderly neighbor’s sheep could access trough water on the coldest days. It meant that their son got a ride to soccer practice because the club president knew that they were busy with construction. It also meant that they were allowed in on the secret of where to find coveted *cep* (Porcini) mushrooms. They returned the favors in equal measure by serving up fungi-laced feasts and wild boar stews, and sharing convivial apéros with new friends. Sophia admits that this lifestyle is likely not unique to France, and they may have had the same experience if they had moved to a remote part of Scotland or Wales, for example. However, this corner of Lot will remain special to the family for the rest of their lives.

In June 2011, the family decided it was time to make another move, this time to another part of France for their son’s school and another work challenge for Sophia. They moved to the outskirts of the historic city of Aix-en-

Provence. Sophia is currently combining her legal experience, negotiating skills, residential design work and client relationship management into a unique package as an exclusive buyer’s agent for residential properties in Provence.

Her company, Provence Search, covers Aix-en-Provence, the Luberon, Saint Remy de Provence and the Alpilles, Arles, l’Isle sur la

Sorgue, and all areas in between. Sophia works as a property search agent – an independent, licensed representative who has access to all residential sales agencies and private sales information. In fully transparent markets with multiple listing services, property search agents may be somewhat less imperative, but in France where the buyer may not speak French, this service can mean having comfort in your investment decision. In France, there is no central listing system and sometimes properties are listed with multiple agencies. Often, these sales offices do not display all listings on their websites, making property details vague, at best, for potential buyers.

Recently, Sophia assumed the role of Director of French Property Finders, where she continues to provide the same tailored services with the benefit of a larger network to tap into. When looking for a property search agent in France, Sophia’s advice is to make sure that they are a member of the *Federation Nationale des Chasseurs Immobiliers* (FNCI), the national professional body for exclusive buyer’s agents. With that accreditation, you can be confident that they are following a code of conduct that will ensure you get the right property.

Once again, Sophia has settled into a new home, a new job and a new set of friends. Her many years as a seasoned expat may make it easier, but her overall expat advice is to immerse yourself in your surroundings, be friendly, help your neighbors and learn some of the lingo. ■

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Village houses with a garden and near shops and restaurants are in high demand in Provence.

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