

Cover story



PETA MATHIAS

*‘My life has
begun again
at 72’*

The fabulous foodie reveals her fresh start in France – and why she’s finally built up the courage to ditch her trademark red hair!

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Cover story

As international travel slowly resumes, there are *Love, Actually*-style airport scenes taking place all over the world as people are reunited with their loved ones after more than two years apart. But for food writer Peta Mathias, it was more of a reunion of self.

Since selling her Auckland home and building a three-level house in the southern French town of Uzès, the 72-year-old has spent her years split between Europe and New Zealand, running her travel tour company from both.

Then came COVID and she was grounded, like all of us, for two and a half years. It was only in June that she was able to return to France for the summer.

"I didn't know how I would feel when I came back here," she muses via Zoom from the bright, colourful lounge of her Uzès home. "There were a lot of questions in my mind, like, 'Have I lost this life forever? Is it sustainable? Can I still do it physically? Am I strong enough?' And as soon as I got here, I knew that I couldn't give it up. I slid back into my life here as if I'd never been away. As if nothing had happened.

"I coped very well, but over the past two and a half years, I feel like I have been in a low-level depression because of all the shocks that I and everyone else have had to suffer. Now I feel normal. I don't have any of the aches and pains that I usually have, and I reckon that's because I'm happy again."

The last time Peta was on the cover of *The Australian Women's Weekly*, it was in February 2020 and the photo shoot had taken place in this charming French town. It was a story about travel, evolution and all the possibilities of the year ahead. Peta had named 2020 "a year of change" and said she was going to be possibly making big shifts in her life.



Peta's fears about returning to her beautiful home in Uzès were unfounded. "As soon as I got here, I knew I couldn't give it up."



When asked now what her 2020 was supposed to be like, she bursts out laughing.

"All my tours were full to overflowing," she says of her travel business, which sees her conducting foodies tours to places like France, India and Morocco. "The business was doing so well that I was talking to a broker about finding a buyer for it.

"Everything that I had worked so hard for, for years and years and years,

was doing what it was meant to.

Everything was going so well. And then it ended, literally overnight."

The term "pivoting", as a forced pandemic career move, has been used a lot, but it is an ability that Peta has perfected during her busy, nomadic life. While travel is one of her great loves, so is change. She relishes it.

"Change is good," she insists. "It forces you up against a wall and it forces you to take a close look at

Embracing her stunning white locks and nomadic lifestyle, Peta says, "I don't have any of the aches and pains that I usually have, and I reckon that's because I'm happy again."





Peta's cosy Supper Club events in Auckland showcase her cooking skills and her love of making new friends.



renting a beautiful, colourful villa to live in while she was based in New Zealand. Trouble is, up until 2020, she'd never had a winter there.

"It was cold, it was damp and it was mouldy!" she exclaims. So she moved into a brand-new apartment, only to have it sold out from under her a week after she moved in, forcing her into another apartment that was too cramped. Finally, friends who owned an investment apartment announced their tenants were moving out and Peta moved swiftly in.

But there was still another seasonal-related problem: Peta's general modus operandi had been to escape winter permanently by moving between Aotearoa and Europe, so there was also the logistical problem of having no warm clothes.

Luckily, Peta is a great believer in buying good-quality clothing and

"I'm a nomad by nature. I don't like security and I don't like stability. I like change."

keeping them for decades – so much so that she literally wrote a book on it, called *Shed Couture*. And her sheds happened to contain all of the designer winter coats she'd bought in Paris in the 1980s.

"I found beautiful designer jumpers in my shed as well," she grins. "All these things I used to wear during the winters... I hope I never have to see them again!"

Uzès state of mind

There's no winter to be seen right now in France. On the day of our chat, it's a blistering 39 degrees and there's an expected 41 forecast for tomorrow. It's a different kind of "go home, stay home" in that no one leaves their air-conditioned houses during the day. "We are living in a heat apocalypse," Peta says. "We usually hit 40 degrees by August, but this year, it started in June."

Heat aside, she says it's an utter dream to be back in the close-knit community of Uzès. On the day she returned, Peta entered her flat to find it filled with wine, cheese, flowers, balloons and welcome-home cards from the neighbours.

Being out of Aotearoa has been a breath of fresh air, she says.

"Life is fairly normal – there is COVID and people are self-isolating, but nobody takes any particular precautions. The only thing is there's a little less tourism, and I'm not doing as many of my cooking classes because most of my clients are Kiwis and New

Pissaladière

SERVES 6

This pungent olive, onion and anchovy tart is found everywhere in France and especially in Provence. The name comes from *pissala*, a purée of tiny fish preserved in brine, which is sometimes used instead of anchovies. Perfect for lunch with a salad and a bottle of rosé, it looks like a game of edible checkers. As an alternative, you can buy raw pizza dough in the supermarket. For an even quicker version, it can also be made with flakey pastry. Traditionally it is made in an oblong shape but this one is round.



FOR THE DOUGH

- ½ tsp honey or sugar
- ½ cup warm water
- ½ tbsp dried yeast or 12g fresh
- 1 cup (270g) flour
- ½ tsp salt

- 1 In a medium-sized bowl, mix together honey, warm water and yeast. Leave to start bubbling – about 10 minutes.
- 2 Mix in sifted flour and salt. Add more warm water if necessary to make dough fairly sticky. Turn out onto a floured surface and knead for five minutes.
- 3 Oil the bowl, place the dough back in, cover with a damp tea towel and leave for an hour to double in volume. Make the topping.

FOR THE TOPPING

- 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1kg onions, sliced into thin rounds
- 2 large garlic cloves, sliced thin
- Couple sprigs of fresh thyme, finely chopped
- 10 anchovy fillets (Ortiz are the best)

- 10 black olives, pitted
- Freshly ground pepper
- 25cm tart tin

- 1 In a large fry pan, heat oil. Throw in the onions, garlic and thyme. Cook on low heat until onions melt into a light, golden colour – about 30 minutes.
- 2 Make a *pissala* by grinding 3 of the anchovies and 3 of the olives to a paste, using a bit of olive oil in a mortar and pestle. Alternatively smash with a fork.
- 3 Turn dough out onto floured surface. Punch down, add a scant tsp of *pissala*, knead a little and roll out into a square, oblong or round shape about ½cm thick or even thinner. Place on an oiled baking sheet or tart tin.
- 4 Preheat oven to 200°C. Mix the rest of the *pissala* into the onions and spread over dough. Grind on some pepper and sprinkle with a bit of fresh thyme. Make a lattice of anchovy fillets, filling the spaces with olives.
- 5 Bake for about 25 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature.

things in your life – the things that you normally wouldn't take a look at."

So while the past two years couldn't involve travel, they did involve change, with Peta starting another business with her "Supper Club" dining events, writing another book, running national food tours and moving house not once, not twice, but three times.

"I'm a nomad by nature," she tells.

"I've always moved around a lot. I don't like security and I don't like stability. I like change. So for someone like me, it was really psychologically hard to be stuck in one place, particularly to be stuck in one apartment, on my own, for months and months and months."

The first move was one of choice: After selling her Auckland home to fund her Uzès build, Peta had been

overjoyed to be overseas, notes Peta.

“They were just happy to go anywhere. I could have read them the phone book for a week and they would have been happy! They loved everything and they were happy to be alive, really. They talked a lot about how much they appreciated their lives and how lucky they were to be able to travel.”

Bionic woman!

In the grand scheme of things, she’s quick to acknowledge that a reduction in international travel is a small price to pay for saving lives. “But I think we’re going to look at life a bit differently now – with a little more gratitude for what we have.”

In Peta’s house, that’s good health and a chance to get back to what she loves. You need one for the other, she says. “Constant change, which is what I’ve put myself through, is what keeps you young, both mentally and physically.”

And there’s been no COVID for her so far. “I seem to be bionic,” she laughs. “The entire floor of my apartment building in Auckland got it, but not me!”

It’s true that Peta is looking as vibrant as ever, although there is one clear difference – that trademark red hair is now a stand-out white. It was a change she had been wanting to make for years, but she just never “had the guts” to make the call.

“In lockdown, I found out what colour my hair really is,” Peta grins. “Turns out, it was completely white – and that gave me a little bit of courage. So one day I went to the hairdresser and said, ‘Do it.’ It took five and a half hours to take me from red to white, but I like it better now.

“I started going grey when I was 17. All my brothers and sisters have white hair – and I’m the eldest! I was the only one who refused to give in.”

It’s the same with retiring, Peta adds. “My sisters kept saying to me, ‘You have to stop.’ And I could stop – I would just need to change my life a lot – but I don’t want to. And I have very good health and there’s no particular



Putting red to bed! “It took five and a half hours to take me from red to white, but I like it better now,” admits Peta.

“I’m very grateful to New Zealanders for supporting me and saving me.”

reason to stop. You have to go at your own pace. Not everyone would want my life, but I’m resilient because I’ve had to be.”

She is the first to admit that the necessary lockdowns took a toll on her mental health and she had to become resolute in making sure she stayed on an even keel

while living alone for so long.

Daily walks and Zoom cocktail parties were helpful tools, as was having a good group of friends and family. “I formed the right bubbles with the right people immediately,” she says, laughing that her French friends have no concept of what she means when she talks about



Peta’s recent food tour in Uzès went down a treat with these Kiwis. “They were just so happy to go anywhere,” tells Peta.



“COVID bubbles”. Peta joined with a couple, both of whom were chefs. “So we just cooked these outrageous meals for each other twice a week. We had themed dinners where we dressed up and we went to a lot of trouble cooking really complicated food that took us all day to cook, just for three of us! That kept us sane.”

When Aucklanders were allowed out, Peta also got to work, introducing her Supper Club nights, where people could buy tickets to watch a cooking demonstration and then dine together.

“The idea was to replicate my life in Uzès because I was so lonely and missing that life so much. I decided I would teach these southern, provincial-style French recipes – the same that I teach in Uzès – and it

turned into a wonderful way to spend an evening.”

She will be continuing them when she returns to Aotearoa and it’s just one of the many ways she has felt supported over the past couple of years, she says.

“My life looked fabulous on Facebook and Instagram because I pivoted to doing tours in Auckland, Hawke’s Bay and even one in Rarotonga, literally sliding in and out between lockdowns with one day to spare. I did speaking events and cooking classes all round New Zealand, which kept me sane. I’m very grateful to New Zealanders for supporting me and saving me.”

During the first year of the pandemic, Peta tells, “I thought, ‘This is just a glitch.’ But by the second year, I realised that I might lose everything. Truly everything. Not just my business, but my whole lifestyle.”

Peta even started the process of putting her Uzès home on the market so she could buy a place in Auckland. “But my heart wasn’t in it,” she says. “Thank God!”

For the final night of her latest tour, Peta invited the group into her home for a last supper.

“The last night of the tour is very special – everyone gets dressed up. I usually have live music and find an unusual location, but I couldn’t find

Be part of the magic

Peta loves nothing more than sharing her love of food, travel and good times with others. Here’s how you can experience some of her unique joie de vivre...

PETA’S SUPPER CLUB

Enjoy a cooking class, book reading and three-course meal with Peta at her central Auckland apartment – commencing again early October 2022.

INTERNATIONAL FOOD TOURS

Peta’s foodie trips are all back on the menu in 2023, with five delicious destinations!

First up is a week-long tour to Morocco in early May, exploring “a land of passion, crushed rosebuds and falling pomegranates – where time passes on slipped feet”.

Next is a week in the magical Basque country, fusing French and Spanish culture, from June 3 to 10.

Then it’s back to Peta’s home base of Uzès, where travellers get to immerse themselves into the French life in this medieval town from July 7 to 13.

A new tour runs in Portugal from September 17 to 23, which will be an exploration of the sunny southern region, full of quaint towns with excellent food.

And finally, southern Italy takes centre stage for a week-long tour from September 2 to 9, taking a look at the secret agricultural paradise of Puglia.

For more information on events and tours or to book, visit petamathias.com.

one, so I decided to have it here. We had cocktails on the terrace, we set up a long table in the living room and then a caterer cooked in the kitchen. We had jazz musicians, and we danced and wept as everyone told stories.

“That final night is always so special,” she enthuses. “All my tours are like that – but this one was exceptional because it was the beginning of my life again.” **AWW**