

# Walk on the Wilde side

**A simple business trip to Valencia as a teenager was the start of a lifelong love affair for a fisherman from Skerries in North County Dublin. Ginetta Vedrickas talks to Conor Wilde about his life abroad and his move into the property trade.**

“Growing up in Skerries was great. It’s beautiful and very much old-style Ireland where everyone greets everyone with a smile and everyone knows everyone,” says Conor Wilde.

Generations of his family had run a fishing business and Conor was expected to carry on the tradition. “I was the only son with four sisters and, as it was a family-run business, my mam did the accounts and my dad the rest. I was the main player helping my dad and we worked very hard, but I’ve always been business-minded.”

It was business that first took him to Valencia at the tender age of 17, when he ventured forth on his first ever trip abroad – which was also the first time he’d



stepped foot on a plane. “I’d only ever been to Dublin twice! And when I got to Valencia I couldn’t believe it as it was huge; everyone was speaking in a language I couldn’t understand and I couldn’t even order a cup of coffee.”

It wasn’t all bad, and Conor returned with lasting memories of the smell of the sea, the friendliness of the people and the beauty of the city, but from then on he found it hard to settle in Skerries. His family started to take in language students, which helped Conor to slowly pick up bits of Spanish, but in 1993 he decided that he wanted to learn the language properly, and he went out to Valencia for a year. “I made the decision to just hang out with locals not expats.”

Conor picked up the language fast and adapted well to life in Spain but it was while he was back in Skerries for a summer holiday that he met Susana, his Spanish wife-to-be. “I’d seen her in Valencia but it wasn’t until we met in Skerries that we got to talk, and we got on well together. Both Conor and Susana eventually returned to Valencia intending to live there permanently but their plans were shelved after Conor’s parents died leaving the family business and his four school-age sisters with no one to take care of them. Conor had to go back but kept his Spanish residency active in the hope that one day, when his sisters had finished their education, he could return to Valencia.

By 1999, the girls were grown-up and the family business was sold, leaving Conor free to head back permanently to Spain, where he

started up a small seafood importing business. The business became successful – the first 12 months saw turnover increase from €48,000 to €2.9 million – and it was at this time that Conor first started to dabble in property. "I'd always been intrigued by property, I'd seen what had happened in Ireland with the property boom and I knew that the same thing could happen in Spain."

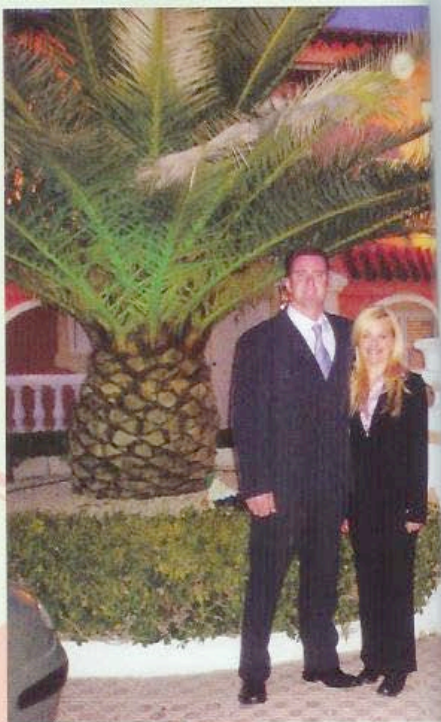
Conor's Spanish skills were by now finely honed, enabling him to scour the newspapers for property bargains and information on the local market. In 2000, he bought a beautiful, two-bedroom period apartment in the up-and-coming town of Torrente on Valencia's outskirts, which he renovated and where he and Susana lived for 18 months.

Conor paid just €80,000 and today the property's value is around €240,000 and is now let to a Spanish tenant for €550 per month. "I found buying a real adventure. I was always on the look out for up-and-coming areas and tried to focus on places with great transport and accessibility."

Buying in Torrente proved to be a smart move – the area's value has shot up by 27 per cent in the last year alone. The buying process also gave Conor real insight into the legal practicalities of buying and, thanks to his local contacts and language skills, friends and family were soon asking for his help in sourcing and buying properties.

At this time Irish and British buyers were thin on the ground around Valencia. "There weren't that many in this area and, for the ones there were, there weren't many meeting points, but there is an Irish bar in Valencia, St Patrick's, which is where everyone goes."

By 2003, Conor's dual life was unsustainable so he finally "knocked the fishing business on the head" and concentrated full-time on property, opening up his own estate agency, Spain and Property. He continued to invest himself and in the same year



**"I found buying a real adventure. I was always on the look out and-coming areas and tried to focus on places with great tran**

bought two off-plan properties. Again Conor focused on an area of the city that he could see was up-and-coming and where transport improvements were proposed. He paid €121,000 per apartment and today, as they near completion, their value has already doubled and Conor will let them in the summer.

The following year, this time for his own personal use, Conor





bought an enormous Mediterranean-style villa in Riba-Roja, which is just 15 minutes from the centre of Valencia. The house cost €274,000 and has taken two years to renovate in what has proved to be a real labour of love. "The house sits on a large plot and we had to remove 31 lorry loads of overgrown hedges and bushes from the garden before we could start." The renovation required professional builders but Conor also did much of the work himself. "It was in a bad state with cracks, leaks and water problems but it has some lovely features. I spent three days on my hands and knees polishing the floors – I'd never do that again!"

The house has been transformed into a smart, spacious, six-bedroom villa complete with features such as grand marble hallway and staircase, and pool set within landscaped gardens and terraces outside. Conor estimates renovation costs at around €120,000 and, although the intention was to stay here permanently, the house is now on the market for €680,000.

"It is a big old house, which will always need work to keep it in peak condition, and I'm hardly in it as I practically live in my car!" Conor also wants to sell as he has an even more ambitious long-term plan. "My dream is to design and build my own house within the next year further out in the countryside overlooking the vineyards and orange groves."

Valencia seems to be firmly in the spotlight for a variety of reasons. Growing numbers of Irish and Brits are relocating here and, as Valencia will host the America's Cup in 2007, buyers are snapping up holiday homes and investment properties with the prospect of good rental income on the horizon. But the area has also suffered from adverse publicity as buyers have fallen prey to Valencia's infamous 'land grab' laws. In his years of property dealings Conor has



yet to come across a single case but he warns buyers to deal only with established, reputable agents to avoid potential problems.

Conor and Susana have now made many friends with the growing numbers of Irish and British buyers coming to this region. Their agency offers a wide range of after-sales services such as finding doctors and schools, so they get to know clients well.

And, while Conor still has fond memories of the fishing village of Skerries and his childhood there, his life is now very firmly rooted in Spain. "I definitely wouldn't go back to Ireland. I just love Valencia's climate, the place and its people." 🌞

**Read more about Spain on page 162.**