

Spreading their wings

Fear of flying could be a thing of the past thanks to a pioneering business, **Anita Merritt** discovered



LEARNING TO FLY: Successful former clients of Virtual Jet Centre in Chudleigh, Ali Haggett and Nikki Martin

ONE in six people suffer with a fear of flying, or aviophobia. For some, travelling by plane can be a terrifying ordeal and for others it can stop them from being able to enjoy long-distance holidays.

Helping people to work through their fears is the Virtual Jet Centre in Chudleigh, near Newton Abbot, which was established 18 months ago by captain Andy Wilkins.

Recently it helped its 100th client on its one-to-one fear of flying course, using a state-of-the-art flight simulator, together with a replica of the interior of a passenger cabin.

Andy said: "I love it because what you're doing is changing people's lives. To do that is a privilege and a real thrill."

The prospect of flying to Ibiza for her stepson's wedding would have once filled Alison Haggett with sheer dread because of her fear of flying, but now the anxiety has become so manageable that she has been looking forward to the trip.

Last week, the 45-year-old Exeter University lecturer from near Tiverton, was preparing for her first long flight since completing a fear of flying course at the Virtual Jet Centre in Chudleigh.

Using its virtual flight centre, followed by a session on a real flight

from Exeter airport to London, Alison has learnt how to overcome her fear of flying.

She said: "I've since done a flight from London to Glasgow, and I wouldn't say I love flying but I'm a lot more relaxed than I was. I've always hated flying but I made myself do it for years and I got worse. It got to the point where I didn't want to put myself through it any more and stopped flying."

For Alison, her fears stem back to her childhood. Her family come from the Scilly Isles so she did a lot of flying in small crafts and helicopters.

She said: "I can remember absolutely hating it as a child and I assume my fear comes from that, but it's a very different experience from flying in a jet. Ultimately, I suppose I must have a subconscious fear of crashing, but I just don't like being out of control or being on something I can't get off when I want to."

"Having a fear of flying is absolutely awful. Anyone whose not experienced it can't understand how horrible it is. I'd start worrying weeks before we were due to fly and have sleepless nights, and the fears would get worse when I got to the airport. It wasn't just take off and landing I didn't like but the entire flight. I don't drink, but I would

always have a large glass of wine to help with my anxiety."

Alison, who is also required to occasionally fly as part of her job, was eventually forced to face her fears this year when in her birthday card, her husband enclosed a fear of flying session at the Virtual Jet Centre.

Explaining what her experience was like, Alison said: "I was absolutely terrified, even in the simulator. Even though I knew we weren't in the air, I couldn't look out

I've always hated flying but I made myself do it for years

the cockpit window for a while. Everything was just so real, but after a while it gradually started to get a bit easier.

"I learnt how an aircraft is flown and about how many back-up systems there are in place, and then I got to fly it myself."

"I then went on a real flight from Exeter airport to London. I was a pre-board passenger so I got to meet the pilots and used the tools I had learnt to stay calm."

The one-to-one sessions have now given Alison the confidence to fly.

She said: "It requires some work on your part. Nobody can wave a magic wand; you have to want to change. But I've got to the stage where I'm flying again which is amazing."

"My fear of flying is something I never spoke about as I felt quite embarrassed, but I've decided to now because I don't think people should be ashamed about it and now that I have, it's amazing how many people say they also have the same problem."

Despite working for the Depression and Anxiety Service, and helping people address their problems, Nikki Martin was never able to face up to hers – a fear of flying. Then two weeks before flying to Tenerife on holiday last summer, she finally decided to practice what she preaches and deal with her anxiety. Not only has she successfully overcome her fears, she is also planning to fly to New Zealand one day to visit a friend who has emigrated there.

The 45-year-old from Newton

Abbot said: "I'm very stubborn; I don't like being beaten so my fear of flying didn't stop me getting on a plane. I'd use coping strategies such as alcohol or Rescue Remedy."

"More recently, I was using medication such as diazepam. I have worked for 11 years in depression and anxiety for the NHS, and I began to think what a hypocrite I am. I get people through their anxiety, but I was not facing mine."

At a local fete, Nikki found out about the Virtual Jet Centre and opted to do one session last summer. She says her flying phobia began after the first time she flew at 16. She said: "Ever since it has always terrified me. My dad was frightened of flying so I probably picked it up from him. It's the whole experience I don't like which developed into a fear of the plane crashing."

Nikki is now able to cope with flying because since doing the course, she knows exactly how an aircraft flies. Recalling her flight to Tenerife last summer after completing the course, she said: "On the way back I had no anxiety at any point. I couldn't believe it. I don't know if I'd say I enjoy flying but I don't feel anxious now. I wish I had done it years ago."