

From mouse to house

Simone Castello does a spot of virtual househunting

HAVING a baby is a life-changing experience for us. Deep emotions re-surface in your relationship, a little one is dependent on you, you're not free to do as you please - even to pop to the loo - and your home has shrunk.

There are heaps of baby stuff as far as the eye can see, your laundry basket is overflowing and toys are hazardously taking over all the floor space.

At first you're too tired and sleepy to do anything but wonder at where all this stuff has come from, then you become obsessed by storage solutions and overdose on shelving units and colourful plastic crates.

The next stage is when you realise one more plastic crate or shelf won't do. Your baby is crawling now and she is emptying the bottom shelves of your units and attacking cupboards.

Or perhaps space is not as much of an issue as quality of life. You want your baby to grow up in the countryside, near good schools... Or you might want to downshift and work from home, so living in London is not necessary any more. Whatever your reasons, you start some research to find out where you can afford to move. At this stage, the internet is a godsend, you can do all your research without leaving your house, and if you have one of those special cushions, you can even breastfeed at the same time!

As soon as we realised a move was on the cards, we started researching areas outside London to see

where we could afford to live. We used the internet and also popped into the library to borrow books on English counties - the travel section of the main library is very good.

Being a member of a journalism forum and, of course, of the NCT Editors' forum, I posted messages requesting members to suggest good locations and, to my surprise, I received many friendly emails. We compiled a list and my partner crosschecked it with train timetables to London while I researched prices using www.fish4homes.co.uk and www.rightmove.co.uk, refining the searches with www.houseprices.co.uk (where you can find out how much houses actually sold for).

Having decided on Bedfordshire and Herts, my partner downloaded Google Earth and we started looking at satellite images of various locations. I checked towns on www.upmystreet.co.uk and www.ukvillages.co.uk. You can use these sites even if you want to move locally, as London boroughs are featured.

The internet research is over now and we have to visit the locations we are interested in to pick up the local flavour. However, there's still lots of

extra research to be done. Most town councils have their own website where you can discover their facilities; and you can find out local issues through their local paper, check out how the schools are faring, even find out if SureStart has a programme there...

And if, like me, you're a house junkie, visit www.zoopla.co.uk, a new site where you can get free estimates or see how much they rate your property!



Urban terrace?



Leafy semi...



...or suburban detached?