

Debbie (centre)
with her mate
Kathryn (left) and
her father Frank



RIDING OFF INTO THE SUNSET IN

CANADA

If you're attracted to the US by its outdoors lifestyle but put off by its stringent visa system, all is not lost. As one Yorkshire family discovered, Canada is just as appealing – and easier to get to

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Having ridden horses all her life, Debbie Atha, 36, from Yorkshire, had always nursed a lifelong dream to become a cowgirl. A two-week holiday on a dude ranch in Colorado a few years ago reignited that dream.

"I knew I wanted to live on a ranch for the rest of my life," says Debbie. After quitting her job in the UK, she headed back to a Colorado ranch for a year. There she decided to set up her own ranch in the US running family riding holidays. Having persuaded her parents to join her, the search for their dream ranch began.

However, red tape meant the Athas had to have a rethink. "Every partner in the business had to have \$1 million (£606K) in liquid cash, and for every British employee there had to be ten US nationals employed! Needless to say, this was beyond our reach and forced us to look elsewhere," says Debbie.

On the suggestion of a friend the Athas turned to Canada, and specifically, British Columbia. After a gruelling search covering hundreds of miles, the Athas arrived at the Free Rein ranch in Cariboo: "It was so perfect, and beautiful. I was home."

The business has gone from strength to strength: "All sorts of nationalities visit our ranch and we all have a great time," says Debbie.

Like the Athas, many Brits want to relocate to America, but end up having to abandon

their dream because they can't get a visa. This is where its neighbour, Canada, comes in. It received a record number of immigrants in 2007, and is one of the most popular emigration destinations for Brits.

Nicola Way, founder of Canadian homes websites, BestHomesBC.com and AssignmentsCanada.ca, says that Canada gives a warm welcome to immigrants: "The Canadian government views it as the main component in battling an ageing population and growing skilled worker shortages. Up to 6,000 Britons emigrate to Canada each year through applying for one of the four main visa categories – Skilled Worker Class, Provincial Nominee Programme, Family Class and Business Class."

And Canada has an enviable lifestyle. "Canada is regularly listed by the United Nations as one of the 10 best places in the world to live," says John Prior of Undiscovered Properties (www.undiscoveredproperties.com).

Canada boasts some spectacular natural wonders including Niagara Falls, the Rocky Mountains, 42 national parks, the Northern Lights, and every kind of outdoor pursuit imaginable. It also has a low population density, and while the climate is extreme, the West is an exception, offering a similar climate to Britain.

Brits tend to find the east and west of Canada most appealing. In the east, the majority of jobs can be found in Ottawa and Toronto, Canada's financial centre. Expect to pay on average \$395K (£293K) for a detached home in Toronto and \$301K (£170K) in Ottawa. North of Montreal is ski capital Mont Tremblant (a seven-hour flight from the UK). This is the place to find a log chalet for winter ski escapes.

Moving west, the up-and-coming Okanagan region is 250 miles east of Vancouver. It has Canada's only desert, the lowest rainfall and the highest temperatures, with alpine meadows and mountain lakes. It's a favourite with retirees who love the climate, the golf and skiing. The main cities are Kelowna, Osoyoos, Penticton and Vernon. Here, a detached house costs around \$350K (£195K), and an apartment around \$258K (£146K).

In the extreme west, there's Vancouver and neighbouring city Victoria. Vancouver combines outdoor attractions (ski runs are just 30 minutes from the centre) with culture. Average detached house prices in July 2009 were \$712K (£402K), or \$365K (£206K) for apartments. An up-and-coming area of the city is Gastown, where new restaurants and fashion boutiques are opening. One-bed beds here start from around \$400K (£226K).

For outdoor lovers there's Squamish, 45 minutes from both Vancouver and Whistler, (and more affordable than the latter). From rock-climbing to skiing, golf to scuba diving, this town has something for everyone. The 2010 Winter Olympics has boosted property values and increased development projects. Choose from mountain-top homes with views of the Valley and Howe Sound to waterfront condominiums with marina access. The average price of a detached house is \$440K (£248K) and \$220K (£124K) for an apartment.

Pulled by lower house prices, excellent schools and universities and a milder climate than Vancouver, the city of Victoria is enjoying a resurgence in popularity. Average detached house prices in July 2009 here were \$565K (£319K), or \$326K (£185K) for apartments.

The Athas used foreign exchange specialist Forexmost Currency Group to transfer cash to buy their ranch (0800 781 0601; www.forexmostcurrencygroup.co.uk)

To learn more about emigrating to Canada and other destinations visit *A Place in the Sun* live exhibition from 2nd-6th October at NEC Birmingham www.aplaceinthesun.com