



Beauty therapist Victoria Elwen and salon owner Sharon Besombes



The 'Funky Feet' fish pedicure



Minx nail transfers



Sharon offers a wide range of massages

SPOILT FOR CHOICE

Beauty therapist Sharon Besombes worked in exclusive spa resorts in America and Bermuda before returning home to Scotland when Smiths at Gretna Green opened, to help set up and manage its day spa. Five years on she now owns Spoilt at Smiths and tells **Anne Armstrong** about her plans for the future

Photography by Jenny Woolgar

For a girl who'd never ventured far from Dumfries & Galloway, sitting on a plane ready to jet off to the USA to start a new career was quite a daunting prospect. With take-off fast approaching, Sharon McKerlie decided she wanted to get off and stood up.

But thanks to the calming words of an air stewardess, Sharon stayed put and went on to enjoy some memorable years working as a beauty therapist in exclusive spa resorts in America and Bermuda. And she picked up a husband along the way.

Now Mrs Sharon Besombes, she is enjoying putting the expertise gained on her travels to good use back home in her own salon, Spoilt at Smiths, located within the four-star boutique hotel Smiths at Gretna Green.

Sharon admits: "I just never wanted to travel. My older sister Caroline was the traveller and I was the home bird. The furthest I'd been before America was to Chester for college, so sitting on that plane was such an ordeal. But my family really encouraged me to go and I'm glad they did."

Sharon, 34, grew up in Dumfries, attending Loreburn Primary School and Dumfries Academy before her parents, Kenny and Moira, moved the family to Moniaive when she was 16, when they bought the Craighdarroch Arms Hotel.

The family ran the hotel for around seven years and Moira and Kenny, whose family hail from the village, still live there.

Sharon started out on her beauty

therapy career working locally with House of Beauty in Dumfries, before deciding to go to Chester to train at the prestigious Lillian Maund International School of Beauty. On finishing her two-year course, Sharon was offered the chance to work in America by a former pupil of the school, who had set up a spa in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

A favourite holiday destination for Americans, with 25 golf courses – despite the island being only 12 miles long by five miles wide – and a host of other sports and sailing facilities, it turned out to be a dream place to work.

Sharon says: "It really is just a fantasy island; it's such a lovely place. I originally planned to work there for 18 months but ended up staying for five years.

"Americans love to look after themselves, so it was great experience for me. I had one regular client who used to wear tartan trousers every time he came to see me; they love Scots who go out there."

It was after a St Patrick's Day Parade in Hilton Head that Sharon met her Swiss husband, Jan, who was travelling in America and working in a hotel on the island. They stayed in Hilton Head for a few years before deciding to go further afield and headed to Bermuda, via a quick stop in the Cayman Islands.

Sharon says: "We both got jobs in Bermuda; Jan in a hotel and me in a spa in the capital, Hamilton. We stayed for two years and enjoyed it. I remember being in a buffet queue one day and turning round



Sharon says of owning Spoilt 'I felt I was ready to take on the salon and develop it. It's been a whirlwind, but it's a great opportunity'

and there were Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones in the queue. They were such nice people and nobody bothers them there.

"Bermuda was a lovely place, but very much an island and you could feel a bit isolated. We had decided to get married and Jan wanted to come back to Scotland, so we started looking for jobs at home."

In one hectic long weekend back in Dumfries & Galloway, Sharon and Jan had job interviews for the new hotel being built in Gretna Green, Smiths; picked Sharon's wedding dress; had Jan's kilt fitting and sorted wedding invitations. After an anxious wait back in Bermuda, they found out that had both secured jobs at Smiths and moved back to Scotland in December 2005.

Sharon was appointed salon manager for Spoilt, the beauty salon within the new hotel, and was able to work with an architect, designer and professional spa consultancy to get the salon just the way she wanted. She wanted it to have a day spa ethos and set about sourcing top quality products and looking into innovative treatments before opening in July 2006.

It was a busy time: "Jan started working as front desk manager at the hotel in January, we got married in March, I opened the salon in July and we bought our house in Eaglesfield the same month, so it was a bit hectic.

"We got married at Maxwelltown Chapel near Moniaive with Jan's family over from Switzerland and friends from America; we had a wonderful time."

Spoilt was a success from the start, with Sharon offering a full range of treatments, from facials to massages, pedicures,

manicures, waxing and makeup, using products such as comfort zone, OPI for nailcare, Bare Escentuals makeup and Fake Bake for spray tans. Hairdressing space was also created, with self-employed stylists coming in to do hair for the many bridal parties which pass through Smiths.

Sharon says: "At first it was expected that our business would be predominantly weddings, but I also wanted to build up a relationship with local people and we've really done that. I have local clients from all over the Gretna and Annan areas and as far as Dumfries."

Taking a break to have her son Xavier, who will be three in October, Sharon appointed therapist Victoria Elwen to help her out. She now enjoys juggling work and family life and took the plunge last year to

ask Smiths' owners if she could buy the salon and run it herself.

"I felt I was ready to take on the salon and develop it; offering new treatments. It's been a whirlwind, but it's a great opportunity," says Sharon, whose new treatments include the 'Funky Feet' fish pedicure, which has proved really popular.

Sharon is also busy re-decorating the salon and adding her own touches to it, while always on the look-out for new innovations for clients. She adds: "I still get itchy feet to travel sometimes, but I really enjoy getting to meet all the different people here. I'm very content." D&G

■ Spoilt at Smiths: tel: 01461 336002 or see www.smithsgretnagreen.com/hotel-day-spa.

Win a pamper day at Spoilt

Here's your chance to be spoiled at Spoilt with a superb pamper package prize provided by Sharon Besombes, complete with lunch for two at the award-winning Smiths at Gretna Green.

This fabulous Pamper Day prize is worth £165 and includes: a one-hour massage; a 15-minute Funky Feet Fish Pedicure, followed by a Spa Pedicure and Minx nail transfers on the toes (total value: £125). Lunch is for two people at Smiths, to the value of £40.

To be in with a chance of winning, complete the coupon on page 130 with the answer to the following question:

Q: What year did Spoilt at Smiths open?

The closing date is 29.09.2011.

