

Simple life - but mobile phones remain

PARIS, FRANCE: At a remote spot deep in the French countryside, Britons Bob and Diane Kirkwood have created an eco-friendly refuge that is like taking a step back in time.



Music comes courtesy of an old Decca 66 record player and a selection of 78s. Oil lamps and candles supply the lighting and if you want the Internet you'll have to make the trek into the nearest town.

Tourists have long flocked to France in search of the rural dream.

But the Kirkwoods have taken things one step further, offering holidaymakers the chance to live without mains electricity, flushing toilets, mobile phones or Internet access.

Tapping into the modern day nostalgia for a simpler, less hectic existence, the Kirkwoods' holiday cabins in the Perigord-Limousin Natural Regional Park in southwestern France are an antidote to the "24/7" lifestyle of many visitors.

"It all happened by accident really. There's no work around here so you have to find something to do," Bob Kirkwood said by telephone from his home near the small town of Piegut.

The couple fell in love with the natural beauty of the area and its slower pace of life during a short visit there in 2000.

"It's all just forests really and very backward farming. I mean, it's not unusual to see people ploughing with horses," he said.

Cheap property

Astonished by the rock-bottom cost of property in the area, which Bob calls a "real backwater", the Kirkwoods bought a house as a holiday home and after spending the summer there, decided to stay permanently.

When a nearby piece of land with a lake came on the market, they bought it and converted an old shack into a bolt-hole for themselves. But because of the isolated nature of the spot, Bob found he had to turn himself into an expert on off-grid living.

"We didn't go into this because of green issues," says Bob, 50, a carpenter by trade. "It was just that you can't run electricity or other services to this class of building because they're so remote. So we had no alternative really other than to find ways of generating a bit of power and it all led from there."

Bob began by buying a car battery and "seeing what could be done with it".

Now, the Kirkwoods' cabins, two of their own and a third that they converted and manage for British television celebrity Kate Humble, boast compost toilets, wood-burning stoves for heating and hot water and solar powered lamps for lighting, although Bob and Diane prefer candles or oil lamps.

Popularity

The popularity of the cabins took the couple by surprise.

After they finished the first one, they set up a website with a view to occasionally letting it. "Every year more and more people come," said Bob.

Far from putting people off, the lack of facilities and creature comforts are their main attraction.

"There's nothing going on round here. There are no buses or taxis and we're about an hour from the nearest big road," he said. "If you want to do e-mailing, one of the bars in town has got a WiFi spot."

Now, over a decade since they settled permanently, the simpler life remains as much as a draw as it ever was for the Kirkwoods.

Bob never throws anything away and regales readers of his blog with thrifty, "make-do-and-mend" tales of recycling shrunken jumpers into cushion and hot water bottle covers.

Visitors, however, struggle with the idea of disconnecting totally from the outside world, in particular giving up their mobile phones.

"It seems people can't let that go. I wish they could and leave the things at home but they can't," Bob added.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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