

OFF-GRID LIVING

Could you live without hot and cold running water, a flushing toilet or your electricity supply?
Luke Bell finds out what it means to live off-grid.

With fuel and energy prices continually rising, the idea of disconnecting from the national grid and going self-sufficient is becoming increasingly more appealing. Global economies have failed, infrastructures have faltered and authorities have let us down – becoming self-sufficient certainly looks like a sensible option.

Going off-grid is becoming more and more common these days. I've spoken with a number of people living this lifestyle to different extremes to find out just how challenging it is. And it seems, it's actually not as difficult as you'd expect – depending on the degree to which you do it. You just have to take that step, and once you do, the rewards can be plentiful: everything from saving a fortune to gaining a brand spanking new eco-lifestyle.

With the rise in fuel and energy prices looking set to continue, there are obvious practical reasons for going off-grid, but there is

a philosophical side to this lifestyle too, and it is just as alluring. Living off the land and being in touch with nature and the elements appears to be an extremely rewarding and powerful experience. With the fast pace and constantly changing nature of modern society, it is too easy to be preoccupied with work, money, technology and entertainment, and be distracted from the realities of nature. You only need look at the indigenous tribes around the world to see how living off the land can help lift a veil on the mysteries of our universe and give the human soul perspective on the grand cycle of life. "There's more truth about a camp than a house," claims environmentalist Roger Deakin. "The house represents what we ourselves would like to be on Earth: permanent, rooted, here for eternity. But a camp represents the true reality of things: we're just passing through." There is a simplicity to living off the land that even a child can understand and appreciate. Your actions make sense, they have an effect that you get to witness and enjoy. And through living this cyclical



lifestyle, it seems that the bigger picture can start to make a lot more sense to us too.

Tucked away in Findhorn Bay, Scotland, lives Em Magenta with her son and partner, along with her ponies, chickens and dog. Each morning Em wakes up to beautiful views of the bay, tranquil sounds of the surrounding wildlife and the comforting knowledge that she is living her life by the rules of nature. Her home consists of a yurt, a small caravan and a bio-degradable hut idyllically situated in woodland. Em is a big believer in the philosophy of this lifestyle and the benefits it can bring. "All the consumption and the wanting for things that seem to be prevalent in mainstream society are actually a desire for something much deeper," Em suggests, "for a connectedness that we've by and large lost by living divorced from nature." She explains how, through living a self-sufficient lifestyle, she has become acutely aware of how much she uses, because it is all carried by hand.



As a result she naturally consumes only what she really needs and produces less waste. If you produce waste, you have to get rid of it, so re-using it where possible makes life a lot easier. It seems that when it is your own hand that feeds your needs and desires, greed soon disappears.

The family has wood burning stoves for warmth and heating water. Em collects wood that has been washed up on the shore of the bay, chops it up with her chainsaw and uses the sawdust for the composting loo. Everything gets used. In 24 hours they'll typically burn a couple of armfuls of wood. They use color gas sparingly for fast and convenient cooking and any crumbs from the meal are swept outside for the birds and mice to enjoy. With no mains water or electricity, Em's family uses a wind generator and solar panels to generate electricity. "I'm not living this lifestyle in rebellion to any other way," clarifies Em. "I have just come to this way of living because it feels healthy, it is a positive way. When people come to visit us they kind of breathe... they open up."

The practicalities

There are not many who can fail to acknowledge the romantic notion of a self-sufficient lifestyle, the spiritual enlightenment of living with nature and the alluring prospect of escaping from society's demands. The notion itself is undeniably appealing, but is the reality as romantic? Probably not. And is the notion achievable for you and me, in today's world where our lives are so intertwined with money and possessions? Of course it is! There are thousands of people already doing it and tons of resources and advice out there to help you do it too.

One of those who helps to teach others about off-grid living is Ludwig Appeltans. More specifically, he offers advice on living in harmony with our surroundings and now teaches permaculture. He learned first-hand by spending four years living off-grid in a woodland on the west coast of Scotland. A landowner was looking for someone to help take care of his woods and Ludwig

seized the opportunity. He confesses he was not completely off-grid, in that he had access to a power point at the bottom of the hill where he could charge up batteries for his torches and charge his mobile phone.

Ludwig is passionate about nature and was determined to integrate himself into the existing ecosystem with minimal, if not zero, damage. "I had to be extremely careful in the way I went about things," Ludwig explains. "When washing the dishes, I had to ensure that the stream water I used was disposed of in a different location each time, and not in the stream. This was because if any food remnants washed downstream, the rats that inhabit the coastal sewers would follow it back up to the woodland and could cause real damage to the ecosystem."

During his four years there, Ludwig helped to eradicate invasive species like the rhododendron and brought life back to the old oak trees that had made up the original woodland. Ludwig had volunteers come to stay to help out, plus guests would visit, but for the most part it was just Ludwig on his own with the surrounding wildlife. "I never really felt alone," Ludwig reflects. "There is so much life in the woods. I even had a pet robin that would come into my tent and wake me in the mornings. I'd lived in Glasgow the previous winter and found that much lonelier."

Wild food was scarce in the woods so, for Ludwig, living completely off the land was not an option. A flock of sheep had been using the woodland for the last 20 years or so and had been grazing on the plant life. Ludwig helped to introduce plants back into the woods and attempted to keep the sheep away as much as possible. But for his own food he generally visited the local shops. "I would grow my own plants and sell them on eBay to make money that I could use for my own food and to pay for my mobile phone," says Ludwig showing his resourceful nature. "With no bills, life is surprisingly cheap, I only needed around £25 per week." He would burn wood on his stove for heat as well as

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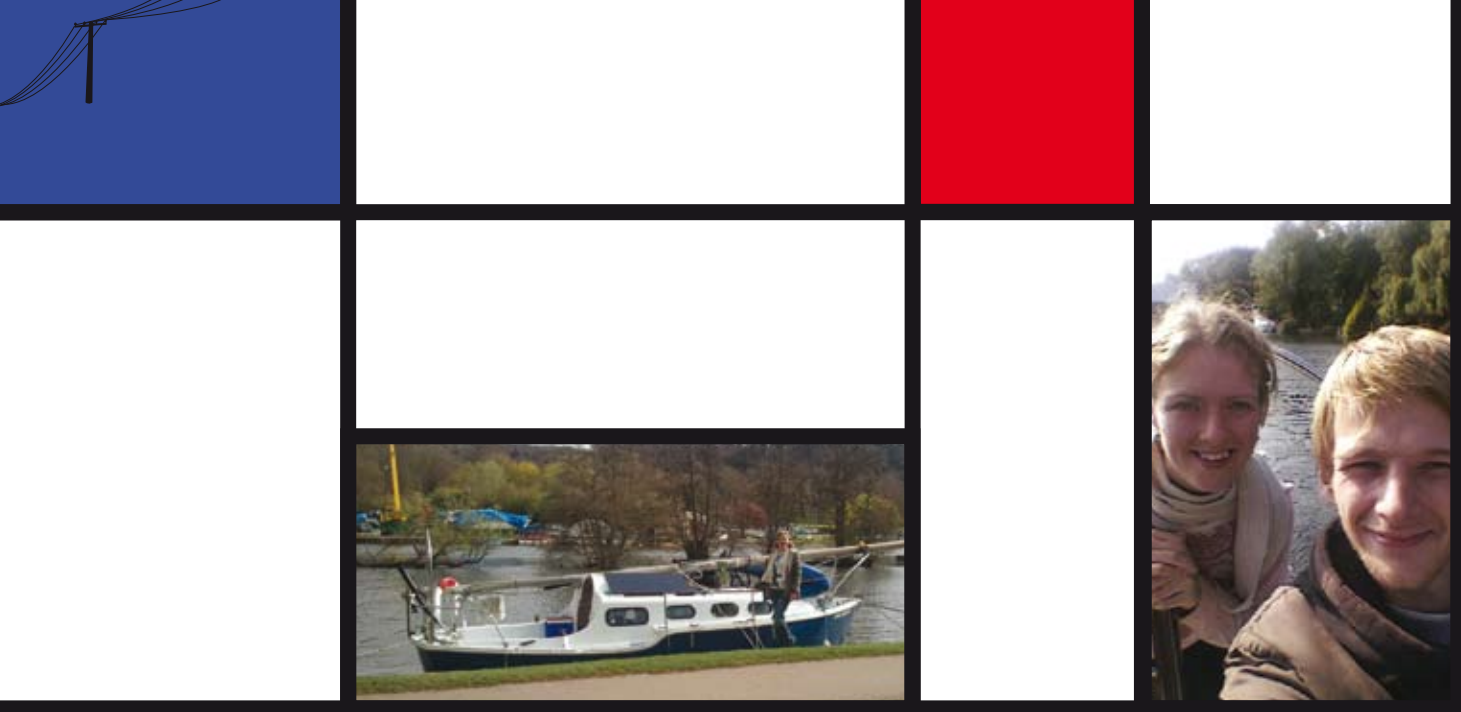
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cooking. His water came from a stream, which he would then boil to sterilise it. His shelter gradually transformed from a tent into a teepee and eventually into a kind of yurt. Life was simple and in that simplicity was great reward. Living in co-operation with the existing ecosystem was obviously a real challenge, but the off-grid aspect seemed like a breeze in comparison.

Isolation...good or bad?

For a lot of people, the thought of isolating themselves from society is a scary thought and not a particularly appealing one. It is a misconception, however, that to live an off-grid, self-sufficient lifestyle means to be alone. Many people are finding that a healthy compromise can be found between sustainable living and practical living. They can generate their own energy, grow their own food etc. and still find plenty of time to work for a salary.

Jessica Buffington and her fiancé are a couple of modern off-gridders, living in the heart of London, on the Thames. I was intrigued at how they have created this balance. "In February of this year I sold all my possessions and moved from the US to the UK to be with my fiancé, Nic," says Jessica. They had a shared dream of living off the wind and sun, sailing and cruising around, seeing the wonders of the world and meeting all the crazy people in it. Their boat is a 25ft yacht, purchased in February, which they immediately began living in to save money. They purchased a 40W solar panel and a couple of large car batteries. "With the help of my dad and some very friendly "boat people" we managed to wire up a system that is suiting us well at the moment," remembers Jessica. They now have USB slots mounted on the wall and use 12V adapters for their laptops. This is certainly a more modern way of living an off-grid lifestyle. Jessica agrees. "We are designing what we think of as a better way to live with the combination of old-school ideas (oil lamps and wood burning stoves) and new technology (android phones and laptops) to connect us to the world and to entertain us."

So what about money? Nic works as a web developer and Jessica is a massage therapist. Both these careers are quite portable and they hope to continue to work as they travel through the French canals and then around the Mediterranean. "The lifestyle is laid back and in touch with nature," admits Jessica. "We spend weeks at a time out in the country on secluded

islands then motor into town to get some culture on our terms."

Jessica and Nic are not the only ones making a go of it in the big smoke either. Author of *How to Live Off-Grid*, Nick Rosen discovered there are a surprising number of people living off-grid on the waterways of London, "Pushing Caitlin along in her pram one day, past a mottled purple houseboat with flower pots lined up along the roof, I realised that here, in the middle of a near-Dickensian London scene, are a number of off-grid homes." Nick estimates that there are 3000 boaters in the UK living off-grid. His book is a fabulous place to start for inspiration.

Another reason why going off-grid does not necessarily mean isolation is the number of off-grid communities now sprouting up around the UK. Scoraig is a paw of land on the west coast of Scotland, which reaches out into the Atlantic ocean. There are no roads leading to the community, just a boat ride across a mile of sea, or 5 miles on foot. Scoraig holds a community of 80 people all living off-grid. Tinkers Bubble is another off-grid community based in Somerset, founded in 1994. Brithdir Mawr is a Pembrokeshire community of 8 "big" people and 4 "little" ones all striving for sustainability, taking care of the land, recycling and conserving resources, gardening and farming organically, and off-grid for electricity and water. The Land Matters commune in Allaleigh, Devon, is one of the most recent off-grid communities to sprout up in the UK and also features in Nick Rosen's book.

Living off-grid is achievable in today's society and can fit with many different lifestyles, whether it's venturing into the wilderness, joining a self-sufficient community, or staying right where you are and just tweaking your home and lifestyle. I have little doubt that off-grid living will become more prevalent in the future, initiated for the most part by a desire to save money. But, from speaking to those out there living the lifestyle now, it is clear to me that this way of living can be so much more rewarding.

If you'd like to start taking steps towards an off-grid lifestyle, see the list of resources I've compiled at www.inspiredtimesmagazine.com.

Luke Bell lives in Scotland with his fiancée and is a regular contributor to *Inspired Times* magazine.



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