

STORY: KATE LEGGE | PHOTOGRAPHY: NICK CUBBIN



## The eco-village people

They're living co-operatively and off the grid. Just don't call them hippies.

**R**etired oil plant operator Chris Luckhurst and his librarian wife Jill feel a little

whiplashed by their abrupt lurch towards an adventure more typical of hipsters in gap years or boomers in the throes of mid-life crises than of a couple who'd been cheerfully contemplating a conventional superannuated suburban sunset. But the sense of abandon is liberating. The Perth-based retirees heard about Tasman Ecovillage from a friend who'd overnighted at the motel that generates revenue for this fledgling off-the-grid community on 7ha of bush near the seaside town of Nubeena, far southeast Tasmania. The Luckhursts visited for a week and now they've bought one of the 10 lots available in the first stage of development. "We're not hippies," laughs Jill, 66, describing the couple as environmentally aware in an ordinary, urban kind of way. "Recycling, limiting plastic bags, that kind of thing." Now they're set to embrace solar power, compost toilets, permaculture gardening, neighbours in their "pod" who they must not only wave at with a smile but consult at length on all

sorts of resources from trees to pets to car-pooling.

"I know everyone runs away to Tasmania; we're so conscious of the cliché, but we thought 'Bugger it', we're going to be part of it," she says. They haven't put their house on the market yet; Jill cares for her 94-year-old mother so there is a buffer period before they turn a sod of dirt. "We're aware of the risks. We know how Utopian ideas can deteriorate," she says of communes that flourished in the '60s. "We're pretty cautious. We're not gullible. And this village is the work of intelligent, conscientious, reasonable people who are not at all cultish. We feel like we've found our tribe."

Lucie Bruvel and her partner Marco Forman (pictured with their son Angelo above) are venturing even deeper into a dream most Australians associate with dreadlocks, piercings, Centrelink benefits and Buddhist prayer flags. They've gained approval to transform a 112ha former cattle property in NSW's Hunter Valley into a rural land share cooperative where families can live a farming lifestyle and share produce grown on site. Heavy earth graders are almost done carving and flattening gravel roads from the front gate of Shepherds Ground to a hillside where 27 architecturally designed homes using renewable resources will be built in close proximity to maximise a sweeping view over the bush landscape. Pink flags flutter from wooden stakes that peg out the 500 square metre sites now ready for construction. Members have paid \$99,000 for entry with housing costs estimated at around \$150,000. The 20 shares already sold have been purchased by a physiotherapist, a couple of doctors, a nurse, an ex- pilot, a market gardener and a woman aged 80.





*Marco Forman at Shepherds Ground, in the Hunter Valley, NSW.*

The hunger for self-sufficiency with like-minded souls has gained momentum at a time of rising property prices and living costs in gridlocked cities where record numbers of homeless seek shelter in doorways and under bridges. Griffith University adjunct lecturer Bill Metcalf has tracked the ebb and flow of alternative communities in Australia and believes concerns about the environment and a desire for social connections are driving the resurgence. A national survey he conducted in 1990 found around 300 such communities. "A lot have disappeared but more are being formed," he says. "I've no doubt it's increasing. I don't think we have any choice given the concern about sustainability, property prices and people not feeling part of a community."

Off-the-grid villages are being pegged out in scenic valleys around the country, while workshops in the construction of earth cob houses, permaculture gardens or community dispute resolution attract younger professionals tired of traffic jams and huge mortgages. Close to regional airports and service hubs with provision for



businesses and technology, these modern versions of an ancient yearning pitch themselves at a demographic keen to live differently.

Commercial developers are responding to this demand as power prices rise and the cost of renewables falls. LWP Property Group intends using solar for 7500 homes in its new Hunter Valley development comprising four "villages", egged on by the Australian Renewable Energy Agency's belief that small, off-the-grid communities are a model for the future.

Surrounded by McMansions in Perth, the Luckhursts want to inhabit the earth lightly even though they worry their decision at such a late stage of life is scarily rash. "We've lived in Perth for most of our lives. All our friends are here. When you get to our age it's not easy to forge networks so moving to a new place is frightening," Jill says with a tremor of exhilaration. "Society is so disconnected at so many levels. Everything is mired in the status quo but we've decided to take action." She searches for a word to describe her migratory itch. "We're not tree changers or sea changers ... " These pioneers are me-changers, more concerned with the welfare of our planet.



*Not hippies: Jill and Chris Luckhurst*

**Young professionals with a different sensibility** are refreshing the ideas that gave rise to the alternative communities of previous generations. They bring smarter technology, a sharper aesthetic and a desire to engage in the outside world. Currumbin Ecovillage, nestled into 109ha of Gold Coast hinterland, boasts a 25m lap pool with

yoga pavilions, a commercial kitchen plus pizza oven and an entry price of \$400,000 to \$1 million, depending on land size and house style. Developer Kerry Shepherd and her late husband Chris Walton went looking for a place to love when they bought the site in the late '90s. "We wanted to live a green life," she says. They insisted on housing designed with recycled materials, incorporating passive thermal design principles for heating and cooling, with systems to collect power and water on site.

Author John Ahern, who moved in with his young family seven years ago, is sold on the strong community that thrives here even though participation in governing committees and working bees is voluntary. "It's up to you how involved you get," he says, allowing a wry dig at "collective decision-making that can go on for hours about the smallest things". This former air conditioning addict who once kept an energy-guzzling beer fridge even when it was empty still has a plunge pool, but the power that runs it is clean.

The one-lane bridge that crosses the creek might slow traffic, but while drivers wait to cross they chat. Ahern says his initial irritation at this has given way to gratitude. "On almost every occasion I'm forced to slow or stop for cars, cyclists, kangaroos, sun-seeking snakes, kids on skateboards and even hopeful fishermen clinging to the rails ... each unwanted 'delay' is like a little injection, a daily reminder that whatever I'm speeding off to do can wait just a few seconds longer."

He ticks off other benefits including the dark sky policy with no street lights, the absence of fences, centralised waste collection, and neighbours who look after each other because they know who is poorly or at risk. The slowing down affords greater awareness of each other, just as relying on alternative energy sources connects residents to what is happening outside the window. Appliance use is curbed according to the supply of sunlight, wind or rain, rather than expecting every need to be gratified instantly.

The eco-village start-ups mushrooming around the country in Tasmania, Victoria and NSW may not be as grand as Queensland's Currumbin but they stem from the same ambitious hope for a simpler, shared life. The business of getting offgrid is, however, vexed, lengthy and onerous. Development applications can take years; stringent regulations covering water, power and waste require meticulous planning, and building service roads through rural holdings is expensive. "Many more are imagined and planned than ever start," says Griffith University's Bill Metcalf, who likens eco-villages to small businesses. "Of those that do, about half collapse within two years. Half of the remainder collapse at the end of five years, while most of those that make it to five years prosper indefinitely."

The founders of Narara Ecovillage looked at 100 properties before settling on a

former research station near Gosford on the NSW central coast. When the 63ha former Gosford Horticultural Research & Advisory Station site owned by the state Department of Primary Industries came on the market in 2012, the group raised \$4 million from their mailing list of interested families in three weeks. Just over an hour from Sydney, and close to coastal towns, 60 lots have been sold and last month the construction of access roads was started.

Project Director John Talbott, who spent 25 years in the world-famous Findhorn ecovillage in northern Scotland, says the resurgence of interest "is much more mainstream". Whereas the British Home Office once described Findhorn residents as "harmless eccentrics" (Talbot converted an old whisky vat at Findhorn into a two-bedroom dwelling), local councils in Australia have encouraged the latest crop as a win-win for all.

The NSW Government awarded Narara a grant to design a smart grid with input from the CSIRO while Sydney architect Philip Thalys lent his expertise in urban planning and design. "These places are not for weirdos or the lunatic fringe anymore," Talbot says. "They are becoming a very attractive model for early adopters who are prepared to take a risk and try something new."

It helps that it's only 15 minutes' walk to Gosford station, and close to the freeway into Sydney. "We need employment options," Talbot says. "We've moved on from the communes and complete self-sufficiency. The idea of a gated community doesn't hold. These are much more about interdependence and doing what we can to lower the carbon footprint and boost the quality of life. People are waking up to the fact that we have to have a different model beyond sprawling suburbs and insatiable consumption. We don't have all the answers but we're trying something different."

The bottom line is critical. Tasman Ecovillage operates an on-site 1970s motel, small golf course and Hub Cafe to generate cash flow in the establishment phase as houses are built and gardens planted. "We're blessed to have a community enterprise," says Karen Weldrick, a founding member. Proximity to the town of Nubeena provides a catchment basin for services such as banking, chemist, police, school and aged care; Hobart is a 20-minute commute. The village website is at pains to stress that places once considered "marginal and idealistic" are now "quite mainstream".

Residents at the Goolawah Co-operative community, set up 16 years ago on NSW's mid-north coast, cite the benefits of being close to an airport and regional commerce. Anne Wilson and her partner Paul moved here seven years ago. She runs a business installing solar panels; he's a biodiesel consultant who works on projects from Papua New Guinea to King Island. "We don't want to encourage a dropout culture," she



says. "We're very much connected to the local community. We have nurses and schoolteachers here. It's not about saying 'Stuff the rest of the world,' but more about living according to your values."

Julica Jungehuelsing, 52, left her inner Sydney apartment to join Goolawah in 2014. A freelance reporter for German media, she can work from anywhere. Her partner Peter, 64, project managed the construction of their house. "We were tired of the city and non-stop conversations about real estate values. And it's fantastic not being dependent on fossil fuels." Better still is the community spirit. "When we put our roof on, 15 members of the community came to help. We enjoy the sharing and the exchange of skills or produce from people who grow more than they need, and the different way of making decisions."

Members meet once a month but attendance is voluntary, Jungehuelsing says. "You can be part of it if you want but you don't need to eat breakfast together every morning. This is a different scenario to the villages that started 50 years ago."

Builder James Galletly and his wife Alicia, also refugees from Sydney, are midway through building a straw bale house. "We spent a year looking at alternatives. It had to be affordable, close to the beach and close to a regional centre," he says of a decision motivated by the need for roots, for social connection. "Historically these places attracted people who were dropping out, but that is not the case now. People are seeking a higher level of interconnectedness as well as the environmental reasons."

Residents pay from \$30,000 to \$50,000 for a share in the co-operative and the right to occupy 1.2 acres; building a house costs up to \$100,000. Without normal bills for electricity, water and the like, household costs are around \$150 a week (the main outgoings are phone plans, car rego and food not grown on site).

In his early 30s, Galletly is one of the younger members. A demographic spread is important to the health and vigour of every society, and some communities discourage too many single mothers or older retirees out of concern a lopsided membership will suck more energy and resources than can be replenished. La Trobe University PhD candidate Rachel Goldlust, who studies eco-villages, says most people who join them are "driven by political disenfranchisement and a desire to live more communally with greater self-sufficiency".



*Sandra and Peter Cock on the property where they raised two children, and near where they protested against electricity 40 years ago.*

**Barely an hour from Melbourne's clogged arteries** and steel towers, the sprawl of houses surrenders to bush as the road winds steeply to the mountaintop co-operative



community of Moora Moora. Founding members Peter and Sandra Cock raised two children on the 245ha property that supports about 60 people, most of them indoors on this rainy weekday. An early model wind generator stands forlornly near the entrance, its blades disabled by a recent lightning strike. Though residents also have solar power, Sandra is frugal: "I don't use hairdryers, toasters or the iron." She likes taking her cue from the weather. "You've got to be careful about switching things off."

Forty years ago, younger and feistier, Sandra and Peter were arrested for trying to stop state electricity workers bringing flick-of-the-switch convenience to these parts. They lost that battle, though their village is off the grid. Peter is now lobbying for approval to create a burial ground so when the time comes they can be laid here to rest deep under the loamy soil where they've anchored a social experiment, choosing the messy yet lively engagement with community over a nuclear family model.

The house next door to theirs recently fell empty when the elderly occupants moved closer to services, but the Cocks plan to stay by renovating the downstairs so they can age in place on one level. Another veteran member, Mark, who is a cabinet-maker, hammers and saws in the background while Sandra guides us through to the warmth of a large lounge room lined with comfortable leather chairs. The wood stove is addressed with an awkward cough. "You can find some contradictions," Peter jests. "At least the wood's an on-site resource. We don't live a zero environmental impact. There are too many trips to town for coffee."

When the clouds lift a spectacular view unfolds, the valley below neater with its roads and pastures than the tangle of mountain wilderness. Paradise never

is, of course, but only two members have been evicted in Moora Moora's history after collective agonising in the red-brick lodge that serves as a gathering place. Last month members debated a thorny issue for 70 minutes. "I was really proud of the discussion. It was respectful, deep listening," says Sandra from the kitchen where she's making broccoli soup and a fruit loaf for lunch. Newcomers are given the benefit of a six-month trial before purchasing a \$30,000 share plus the price of housing.

"The co-op is a lousy capital investment but a great lifestyle," says Mark, downing tools for a break. He raised two daughters who grew adventurous spirits in this free-range playground. They live nearby, as do the Cocks' adult children. "They had enough of community as kids," Sandra laughs. "We were worried we wouldn't get a second generation but we've just voted in a new member who is 30 with three kids." Around 20 kids live on site, attending a local Rudolf Steiner school, and most adults work in the region.

Sandra's a psychologist and Peter's a retired academic. "Community comes in waves," he says, "and I think we're at the beginnings of an up. I'm really pleased we've survived so long and so well, and we've honoured the vision. It's a privilege for us, now in our third age, to be living in a multi-generational community."

Lucie Bruvel and family.

Both of them would do things differently with hindsight, such as building houses closer together for a smaller environmental footprint, or offering a user-pays model for members who want to opt out of regular working bees. "It's a really interesting way of living but there's no way I'd start one again," says Sandra. "Knowing what I know now. It's a lot of work. A lot of people want community but they think it just happens without the contributions and commitment that goes with it."

**Eight months pregnant, and with 11-year-old son Angelo** underfoot, Lucie Bruvel talks excitedly of plans that have absorbed her waking hours since she returned from France in 2012 with a vision for transforming the 112ha Hunter Valley farm. A smart brochure promotes the benefits of a close-knit, environmentally conscious community where residents can thrive "with a sense of belonging and wellbeing". There is the promise of commercial kitchens in a community hub with guest quarters and market gardens.

Listening to the scope of what needs to be conjured from the dust, I feel exhausted. "My mother says it'll be great in 10 years," laughs Bruvel. "I tell her it's great now. I like new initiatives. That is what I love, whereas others prefer to step into something already made. It's exciting. It's a lot of work but that's part of the quest, part of the enjoyment." And while they have cleared and planted and talked themselves hoarse selling the potential, there are so many hurdles yet to be overcome - from how decisions will be made once the community arrives, to transforming the cattle property for organic farming.

Bruvel sees community as a model for productivity, not as a sanctuary for escape. "You can't kick back like the old hippie communes. They don't attract me. I would never have moved to one of those places. I love the interaction of business and exchange, the hustle and bustle."

Her partner Marco plucks greens from the vegie garden to complement the rabbit pie we eat for lunch, sitting at a table surrounded by display boards and architectural plans. Outside a hen leads her brood of chickens on a hunt for food. "I'm connected to this country because I grew up here and I want to give something back," Bruvel says. "It's got a lot to do with simplicity, simplifying the way you live, spending more time connecting with people, using fewer resources."



*Samuel Alexander: 'There is absolutely no way seven billion people can live in material affluence.'*

Who hasn't sat in a traffic jam cursing as they co-ordinate household logistics via mobile phone on a homeward commute, wishing for a simpler way of being? "We can't all run out into the bush and build a mud hut or grow our own food, but we can rethink the existing models," argues Samuel Alexander, a lecturer with the University of Melbourne's Office for Environmental Programs. Two years ago he spearheaded a demonstration project with 10 volunteers on an 8ha property in south-east Victoria. He says the experiment "gave a little glimpse into a world that could be". Radical and eccentric, he channels American philosopher Henry Thoreau, who built a cabin in the woods so that he might pare life to its simplest elements.

"I often ask my students to tell me which community is richer, the one where every household has a lawnmower, or one where neighbours share one?" While doing his PhD in law Alexander built a shed at the rear of a shared student house where he survived on \$6700 for a year. The rural project he named Wurruk'an started a community from scratch, constructing "tiny houses", digging gardens and orchards, learning to make do with less.

Alexander says the experience changed his life. "Thirty strangers came together to build a mud hut. By the end of the week we'd become friends and learnt new skills. When people visit Wurruk'an you see a twinkle in their eyes as they walk around and see these unusual abodes. They're not going to go away and build a mud hut but they might talk to their neighbours or partners and that will contribute to a cultural shift."



He lives in the inner-city suburb of Coburg but his front garden is an orchard and his backyard a vegie garden. He rides to work on a bicycle, buys clothes from op-shops and encourages city dwellers to start with a few small steps towards curbing consumption. "There is absolutely no way seven billion people can live in material affluence without collapsing ecosystems - to say nothing of the nine or 10 billion people expected to inhabit the Earth in coming decades," he says.

Disrupters always sound crazy. Cultural change is a hard slog. "Pioneers are easily dismissed as utopian dreamers or escapists," Alexander says. "This is our civil rights movement. Despairingly small to begin with, the ideas at its heart eventually became mainstream."

This is the same spirit urging Jill and Chris Luckhurst forward. They don't see themselves as revolutionaries but a deep disquiet has encouraged them to march.

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