From the city to the country (and sometimes back again)

Not everyone who moves to the country ends up staying there. In fact, for the first time in years, as many people are moving back to cities as are moving out to the country.

Liz Jones

‘I was just divorced, and bored with my easy, if super-busy, London life. I wanted to live somewhere quieter, simpler, more beautiful, so I sold my house and bought a big farmhouse with 50 acres of land. I’ll look after horses, I thought, I’ll get a dog. I’ll grow all my own food. It will be idyllic and friends will come to stay and tell me how lucky I am to live here.

But even from the first week, it was a nightmare. When I moved in, the house was cold and absolutely filthy, and the cooker didn’t work. I discovered everything in the countryside is more expensive: you have to drive miles to find a shop where everything costs twice as much as in my local supermarket in London. I never fitted in. I think that in the country, if you are a woman, you will never be accepted unless you are a full-time mum. Another thing I hated was the shooting! I just couldn’t pass a group of men with guns, shooting rabbits and deer, without getting out of my car and saying: “Do you really have nothing better to do on a Saturday morning?” That didn’t make me very popular. I became so lonely, I often used to sit in my car and listen to the kind voice of the satnav lady.’
After five years Liz decided to go back to London. ‘On my last night in the country, I sat outside underneath millions of stars and I thought to myself: ‘I’ve come to the end of a five-year prison sentence.’

Rob Penn

Rob Penn, a writer, left London for some peace and quiet in the Black Mountains in Wales. ‘I’ve been living here in a small farmhouse for eight years now,’ says Penn. ‘It wasn’t easy at first. The fact that I ride a bicycle every day caused suspicion. In the countryside you only use a bike if something is wrong. A local farmer said to me, “I see you on the bike. How long have you lost your driving licence for, then?”’

Over time, however, Penn has managed to fit in with his new neighbours. ‘I’m lucky. I live in a place with a strong sense of community. My local pub is an active part of that. We have two village halls as well. Between them, they put on activities or meetings every night of the week – singing workshops, the garden club, zumba, as well as monthly films and occasional quiz nights.

‘In the city, you choose your community. It may be through work, your football team, or your kids’ school or your colleagues,’ says Penn. ‘In the country, your neighbours are your only community.’

Penn has no plans to move back to London. ‘I stood in a field this week, listening to the first sounds of spring. I love to hear the birds singing in the sunshine. I wouldn’t live anywhere else. The rural sights, sounds and, above all, communities beat the city any day.’