



the rural urbanite

By Caroline Phillips

The countryside, so my spies in Cath Kidston wellies tell me, has changed beyond recognition. The values of London, a global financial centre, have spread into the mud. Nowadays country life, apparently, is very much about *urbe in rus*. Global warming has made Gloucestershire an outpost of Marrakech. The countryside no longer does bleak weather. Nor chintz.

'I don't have to run my iPod off a tractor battery anymore,' I tell my husband BJ, as I put my foot gingerly into our rus-bound car. Our two daughters, squabbling over personal DVDs, scowl from the back seat. In our family, long-haul arguments start within a metre of our home. Now we're going to Babington House, the original country hotel for media couples and their media babies. So today the kids have 90 miles to hone their fighting tactics.

These days, so I'm informed, you leave the city only for flat-screens in the bathrooms, beds the size of Wiltshire and restaurants that serve breakfast until dinner starts. Apparently we're witnessing a mass exodus of happening folk to the countryside to chic houses, hip hotels and groovy seaside resorts.

We arrive at Babington, the world's premier interface of town and country, and a beautiful Georgian house and members' only hotel in Somerset, filled with contemporary furniture,

newspapers, glossy magazines, pregnant heifer-sized baths, and writing paper as glossy and thick as laminated sheets. The sun is beating down. There even seem to be sisal and woodchip paths for those silly enough to venture a country walk.

But no. Where the chips are down, they lead to a shop selling frocks (think Allegra Hicks) and The Cowshed – where our children

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(aged 9 and 11) go to Barbie heaven having French pedicures; and we opt not for Hopi ear candling but for massages with products with names like Dirty Cow, Frisky Cow and Saucy Cow. Is this what they do with edible animals in the countryside?

We could have spent all day watching chick flicks from the bath and drinking proper coffee while guests guzzle brownies, ice-cream and bubbly in the private cinema. And eating superlative dressed crab salad and hedgerow of organic leaves while Pino, the ever-attentive waiter, sends a taxi to fetch me wheat-free bread – although I forgot to ask for seaweed tablets.

But no, BJ rallies the troops for an al fresco cycle ride past stones bearing names like Norfolk Royal (for sitting on) and signposts with hands pointing in all directions, including the sky.

At lunch there's a guest (genus: colour supplement art director) in stripy pyjama bottoms and lime, yellow and red trainers, drinking smoothies. And City traders (wide boys with tattoos and shades as big as Posh's) eating burgers. And single women in PR wearing Indian smocks, drinking Rosé and reading their stars to one another.

There are yummy mummies in gold slip-ons, pashminas, oversized glittery bags and floral frocks – showing more breast than you see in a dairy. Urban warrior husbands who sport little pots, Lacoste shirts, Ray Bans and drink G&Ts. Hordes of children called Imogen, Amos, Iago and Pesto in baby Ralph Lauren. And, being treated like newspaper barons, size zero dogs – boasting personal Babington canine beds, towels and poop bags.

The really beautiful people aren't here – the Madonnas and Liz Hurleys of this world have their own cutting-edge piles. It's dominated by media and fashion types; women who've read the magazines and copied The Look – but don't realise that real Notting Hillbillies do Converse and jeans out of town... more urbe than rus, it gets my vote.

The Weekenders

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