



pollution, overcrowding, traffic, tourists, annoying neighbours, overpriced entertainment, lack on, and on... Do you ever won Wouldn't your child – wouldn't could take deep breaths of fre backdrop, and a better quality you sell up and pack up: the cracked up to be

Text **Caroline Deacon**
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exorbitant house prices, litter,
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of life? Take a pause, before
rural life may not be all it's

We all want to give our children every opportunity, but sometimes doesn't it feel like we are working ourselves to death to pay for it all? House prices, especially in the South of England, have been driven up to the point where most mortgages need two incomes. When both parents work, other costs inevitably rise. A recent survey showed that domestic help is on the increase as more women return to work after having children. Apart from childcare costs, working women employ cleaners, people to do the ironing – some even fork out for housekeepers and gardeners to keep the show on the road.

The problem with life in the fast lane is that whatever you're doing to make life better for yourself and your children, everyone else is ►

doing it too. The big word these days is choice – choice of school, of consumables, of lifestyle, yet all that choice really seems to do is to make keeping up with the Joneses harder and more expensive than ever. Choice has brought our generation to expect perfection, even from our children. After all, we work hard and spend huge amounts of money to ensure they get the best education, buying them an endless array of stimulating toys and educational software.

Perhaps we should pause for a moment and consider BBC's *Castaway 2000*'s nine-year-old participant, Michael Prater. Before spending time on the remote island of Taransay, in the Outer Hebrides, he whiled away his days on his PlayStation and watching television, but read few books and struggled with maths. After nine months deprived of modern accoutrements, learning mathematical concepts through seashells and driftwood, he is confident with numbers and an avid reader. Dr Cynthia McVey, child developmental psychologist and consultant to the programme is quoted as saying that she's never heard the children moan about the absence of TV. "They have become very creative. Their concentration levels are now way beyond their years."

With technology, it is now possible to live and work anywhere, yet most of the population still congregates in the South; more people live in Greater London than in the whole of Scotland. The cost of living, pace of life and stress levels are all higher in the South East. So why don't more of us downsize to communities similar to Taransay?

Nicola and Derek moved with their children, Matthew and Adam, to a remote location in the North-west Highlands of Scotland in 1994.

People imagine a rural idyll, but in fact roads are busy and getting busier; traffic is faster than in urban areas. There are only three small areas which are not blighted by traffic noise and pressure from urban development: South-west Devon and Cornwall, the Welsh borders and Northumberland

"The children moved from a school with 300 pupils, to one that has 20 children and two teachers. Our family boosted the school roll by 10 per cent! They settled in from day one; they would say at the end of the day, 'It's great, but we don't do any work.' What was happening with such good teacher-pupil ratios was that the teachers had time to talk to the children, rather than leaving them to get on with work on their own."

"Now Matthew has started at Gairloch Secondary School. Luckily this is also a good school; with a catchment area of 700 square miles you have no choice. But the children all know each other, and there is none of that inter-school rivalry you get further south."

Nicola runs a relocation business over the Internet, helping other people downsize. She has no regrets. "The children have as many opportunities here, if not more. I missed shops at first, but you adjust and you can get anything delivered. We use the cash and carry once a month, and when I do go to a big town, shopping is now a real treat."

	S.E. ENGLAND Home Counties	COUNTY TOWN e.g. Inverness, or rural Norfolk	RURAL ISOLATION N.W. Highlands, Pembrokeshire
3-BED HOUSE	£300,000	£100,000	£50,000
RUNNING A CAR	High garage costs, petrol competitive	Low garage costs, petrol competitive	Low garage costs, petrol expensive
EVENING OUT	Expensive; babysitting, tickets, meals out and alcohol all cost more	Cheaper all round, and drinks cost about half those in Home Counties	Not so much to do, but pub still much cheaper than Home Counties
NURSERIES	£40 per day	£20 per day	Not available
FOOD	Depends where you shop	Prices and choice comparable	Small local shops more expensive and with less choice, but delivery services good
SALARY FOR TOP EXECUTIVE	£60,000	£20,000	No top executives, unless on Internet

For many of us, however, country living still means moving no further than rural East Anglia and the Home Counties. But living in the English countryside can mean pollution from industrial-sized farms and lack of basic amenities. In the tiny Surrey village where I live, the only public play area has a slide that doesn't work and a couple of rundown swings. Ironically, we love visiting grandparents in west London for the fantastic

playground at Bishop's Park. Our village teenagers are even worse off as their social life consists of hanging around the Village Green.

The Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) points out that for parents in the countryside, there is often "a sense of isolation, nine out of ten villages have no formal childcare facilities, and there are problems accessing other services such as healthcare, while many rural shops and post offices have closed."

More tellingly, according to CPRE, there is not really a lot of difference now between stress levels in city and country. "People imagine a rural idyll, but in fact roads are busy and getting busier; traffic is faster than in urban areas. There are only three small areas in remote regions of England that are not blighted by traffic noise and pressure from urban development." CPRE is now working with the Government to make cities and towns better places to live and work.

The three areas where English country living might still be idyllic are South-west Devon and Cornwall, the Welsh borders, and Northumberland. Veronica and Terry moved from commuter-belt Surrey to Wooler in Northumberland with their

children Catherine and Ben ten years ago.

"We decided to make the move if one of us could find some sort of income, and I landed a six-month contract as a teacher, covering maternity leave. We sold our house and bought one big enough to run a bed and breakfast, and we've never regretted it. The children were involved in our decision to move, and they've always loved it here. It took a while to settle, and you have to make more of an effort to take them places when they're teenagers. I now have a full-time teaching job 30 miles away, and Terry runs the B&B. You have to travel greater distances here, but the traffic is lighter. It takes me 35 minutes to get to work; in Surrey it would have taken a lot longer. And I'm driving through beautiful scenery. I think it was all meant to be."

So when you decide to make the move, is it easy to fit in to a small community? Remember the Eighties when Welsh holiday cottages were torched? Janine married a Welsh speaker and moved to an isolated

community on the Pembrokeshire coast. "I'm still considered an import – even though I've lived here 18 years! Many families go back for generations; they live in houses where their great-grandparents lived. But it's a friendly place and outsiders who come to live and work here are welcomed with open arms. They keep schools open, communities going.

"Whether you can live here depends on the kind of person you are. The nearest M&S is 30 miles away. One woman who came from London couldn't cope with the lack of anonymity. She said she couldn't sneeze without everyone knowing about it. I like that sense of belonging, but she felt people were nosey."

Not everyone finds rural communities welcoming or country life idyllic. "When Thomas was offered the chance to move from working in the City of London to Norwich, we jumped at the chance," Mary told us. "We sold our modest-sized house in Billericay, Essex, and bought a gorgeous, nine-room detached Victorian house in a village in rural Norfolk for under £100,000.

"As I had pre-school children, I got into the local NCT and post-natal networks. However, initially I made friends only with people who had also moved in recently. Locals round here are more reticent. The real problems arose when Emily started school, and we realised she was not doing as well as she should. We wanted to find out if she has dyslexia, but the local authority wouldn't send her for tests – apparently they don't like putting a label on a child round here, mostly I think because they like to keep their purse strings closed! In other counties I'm sure she would have been sent for testing.

"It's not all roses moving to the countryside. There are advantages to a small community – you have all the amenities without the crowds. But you have to travel some distance to change anything that's wrong. If we swapped schools we would have to drive 15 miles into Norwich. Although we are only one-and-a-half hours from London, attitudes take a long time to change."

Is the choice really only between isolated rural living and big cities? A few years ago, Strathclyde University carried out a survey to discover the best places to live in Britain. They asked 2,000 people to prioritise factors that make for a good life: access to health care and education, low crime, cost of living and pollution were the top five. Using hospital waiting lists, crime figures, house prices, school standards and council tax rates, the researchers found that relatively small county towns come out best. Three out of the top five places to live were in Scotland, but as a member of the research team said, "in areas such as education and health there has traditionally been greater provision north of the border." The other two places worth considering were Kendal in the Lake District, and Hereford on the Welsh borders.

Carolyn and Dave, and their children Angus, four, and Rory, one, have just downsized to Inverness, which the survey ranked fifth. "We were both in the armed forces and after 17 years you can retire on a reduced pension of around a quarter to a third of your income. The alternative – staying in – would have meant moving every two years and boarding schools for Angus and Rory. Coming from Watford we worked out we could have the same standard of living on a third of our salaries.

YOU KNOW YOU'VE BEEN A CITY DWELLER FOR TOO LONG WHEN:

- Personal space means no-one is standing on your toes.
- Any stranger who smiles at you must be a pervert.
- You think the sky at night really is dark orange.
- You think a municipal park with a flower clock is "nature".

YOU KNOW YOU'RE READY TO ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY WHEN:

- You actually like the smell of manure.
- The idea of driving 10 miles to buy a stamp doesn't bother you.
- You get excited shopping for all your clothes on the Internet.
- You don't mind wearing green wellies for six months of the year.



and that won't change wherever you live. What you are really buying into is a slower pace of life and a sense of community. You need to be prepared for a drop in standard of living, but expectations are lower.

"There are lots of economic problems," says Janine. "Farming is our biggest industry. It's terrible if you don't have a car – there is only one bus a week. But the fact that it is safe for children is a huge compensation. There's not much traffic, they can cycle, go fishing, and we love the beaches and sailing."

"We knew we would take a drop in lifestyle; we were prepared for that," adds Veronica. "But it hasn't hindered us. We may not be able to have exotic holidays, but we can do everything we want to with the children." Terry is taking a book-keeping course and hoping to build up work that way. "You have to be prepared to take what's there to earn a living. You can't hope to live on an income from B&Bs, but it's a bonus."

"Everyone around here survives on bits and pieces," says Nicola in North-west Scotland. "Most people have a holiday cottage or rooms to rent out, and very few people just have one job. It does mean we're a real community: we all muck in and everything gets done."

Perhaps the most important factor in downsizing is choosing the right community. "It helps that I come from round here originally," says Caroline. "One of the reasons we decided to move now was so the children were in the school from the start. I don't know what it's like for outsiders moving to Scotland, but Inverness is pretty cosmopolitan."

Veronica and her family moved because they knew the area already. "My mother comes from the Lake District, and we had come here on holiday three years running. It just got to the point where we didn't want to go back home after our holiday, so we decided to stay."

Nicola advises people who contact her Internet relocation service to rent a cottage for a month or two during the winter months before making their final decision. "If you can see at place at its bleakest, in the wind and rain, and still think you could be happy there, then you probably will" ■

Nicola's relocation service is at www.highland-dreams.co.uk. Her book, *Living And Working In Scotland*, is published by Vacation Work Publications, paperback, £10.99 (Junior Bookshop, £8.99)

"Inverness has more to offer than most towns this size because it serves the whole of the Highland Region. It has great amenities and the quality of life is excellent; there are fewer cars, fresh air and it's less frenetic. In Watford, everyone wanted to talk about how much money they earn. It's much less competitive around here. Schools are great. Angus has 22 in his class, and you don't see many classes larger than 24. In Watford, we could have bought a largish semi for £300,000; here it costs £100,000. Nursery and children's activities are cheaper, entertainment costs less. I bought two tickets to the Scottish ballet and they cost £20; in London you would pay a lot more, if you could get hold of them in the first place."

However, although comparative costs, particularly housing, look attractive, for many people, the cost of raising children – about £60,000 per child – is higher than providing a roof over their head,