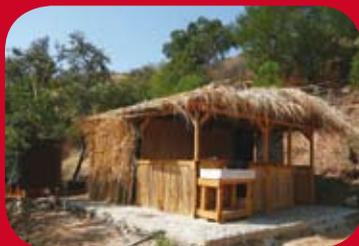
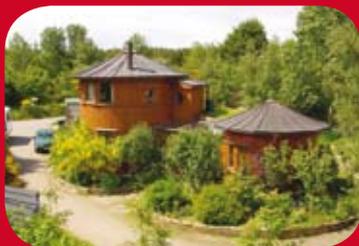


inspiring getaways

by Beth Taylor-Patterson

volunteering in eco-communities

Be part of something special, add green skills to your repertoire and meet like-minded people – what better way to use holiday time than by immersing yourself in a thriving eco-community?



A blossoming interest in eco-living is changing the way we think. This radical reassessment is pertinent to all manner of things and is an ethos we can seek even in the commercial mayhem of the tourism industry. Inspired Times urges soul seekers to ditch generic package holidays and head for more sustainable shores. Visiting an eco-community is a fulfilling experience which may just alter your outlook on our world and the way you operate in it.

Whether seeking an alternative way of life or merely flirting with the idea of sustainable living, eco-communities give you the chance to take part in something revolutionary. Back-dropped by the tumultuous North Sea, Scotland's Findhorn Foundation community – www.findhorn.org – balances spiritual awakening and environmental protection in a fiercely beautiful landscape. A working eco-village, Findhorn's approachable attitude asks only that visitors come with an openness and willingness to experience something new. And there is a lot to experience, from short-term stays to Experience Weeks, visitors choose between a wide range of workshops and events. "We intend to begin with a willingness to have some of our deepest assumptions about ourselves and others questioned," explains Yasko Takahashi, our contact at Findhorn, when describing their approach. As well as a strong environmental influence, Findhorn addresses sustainability in a way which focuses on the social and spiritual. Guests can really get stuck in, participating in service departments, community activities and sharing meals – all real accompaniments to meditation and self discovery.

Heading to warmer climates, Terramada, Portugal – www.terramada.com/eng – is an ecovillage involved in the development of permaculture and self-sustainability projects. An uplifting regression from the clutches of capitalism this community asks that volunteers work in exchange for accommodation and use of their facilities. Set on Lake Beliche in the Algarve, a hard day's toil is rewarded with a soul cleansing trip to the sacred sweat lodge. With the serene mission of sharing extraordinary moments with nature, getting back to your roots in the open air is refreshingly therapeutic and the perfect place for peaceful contemplation. You can also get involved as a guest, camping on site or opting for a unique stay in a quirky clay tipi or bamboo hut for very reasonable prices.

For Nordic souls, Icelandic shores beckon you to the world's oldest self sufficient community. Thousands flock to Sólheimar – www.solheimar.is – each year to learn about sustainable living and see those with and without special needs working together, fully integrated in this modern thinking and inclusive community. A study of the village's renewable energy, agricultural and economic set up provides inspirational proof that sustainable living is a real alternative to today's conglomerate lifestyle. Craft workshops offer guests the chance to hone their practical skills, recycling and reusing natural materials to produce unique and useful products. "People gain socially and culturally as well as learning and feeling joy," explains Axel Benediktsson, who has lived at Solheimar for four years. Short-term options are popular, or adventurous types apply to volunteer for up to a year, participating in the full range of community life.

In recent years the Occupy Movement has drawn a wealth of media attention, calling us to rethink exactly what it means to be in the 99%. Refreshing political attitudes are in full flow at these eco-communities where consensus based decisions are a positive example of what it means to be a true democracy. Experiencing these approaches can have an impact back home too, leading one to reconsider both professional and personal relationships. Naturally, the inspiring people who are actually 'living it' are the best folk to learn from if you want to make a positive change in your life. As well as time to reflect on the self, the allure of these experiences lies in real opportunities to discover practical lifelong skills whilst giving back to a community.

Before embarking on your eco-journey be sure to contact each community you intend to visit. For the people who live there this isn't a tourism destination but a fully functioning way of life. And be it monetary donations or getting your hands dirty, make sure you know, not just what to expect, but what is expected of you. There really is something to be said for eating food you helped harvest, or sleeping in a hut you helped build. And after living it for a week you may go home to find you don't need half as much electricity as you thought you did. So take a trip which nourishes both soul and mind and educate yourself in a way of life. And, unlike a suntan, what you take away from this holiday will last a lifetime.