

A life that keeps on giving

Personal satisfaction, an eye on the future of the planet and a desire to prevent waste – more people are choosing to live sustainably, says **Daniela Harris**

What is sustainable living? We all think we know, but it's actually not such an easy question to answer, so I went looking for definitions.... Meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs, is one. The avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance, is another. And sustainability is a goal for society with environmental, economic and social benefits.

Personally, I like the Google translation in French – ‘*un vie durable*’, a durable life. France’s sustainability initiatives are as old as France itself: slow food, small-scale farming, local markets, the preservation of nature. France hosted the Paris-Climate accord and led the way in committing to changing its dirty 20th-century ways. The government has implemented a number of initiatives to help homeowners create more sustainable homes and in 2019, *The Economist’s* Sustainable Tourism Index ranked France as number one.

Throughout the world, an increasing environmental focus has forced governments to address sustainable living. Once only a small group of people were passionate enough to take stock of their consumption; now with rising energy prices and temperatures, the economics of energy consumption is the question on buyer’s lips and sustainability is at the heart of many a housing conversation.

Whether you buy an old property, a new-build or a plot of land, there are plenty of ways of improving your carbon footprint, future-proofing your house and saving a significant amount of money. We talked to a few people for whom sustainability is important.



Hans Blom’s home and gîtes are built from straw – hence their name, Les Trois Petit Cochons

THREE LITTLE PIGS

In search of a sustainable, eco-friendly life Hans and Suzanne Blom came to France to build three, soon to be four, sustainable cottages from natural materials, predominantly straw. They now live there and rent them out as Les Trois Petit Cochons eco-gîtes (strohuisje.nl).

Hans, how did you embark on this journey?

Back in Holland, we were trying to find somewhere

alternative to live and came across allotments with eco-cabins built on them. A kind lady invited me to see her home there. It was made of clay and straw with recycled coloured glass for windows – like something out of a fairytale! It was my inspiration.

I was a chef, so I cut my hours to four days a week and spent the fifth day shadowing electricians, builders, plasterers, plumbers etc so that by the time we made the move to France I was prepared.

How did you end up in France?

After realising that the type of life my wife and I wanted isn’t achievable in Holland, we looked to France. My uncle suggested staying at his holiday home near Carcassonne to explore the area before making such a life changing decision.

How did sustainability inform your project?

For me, sustainability is about longevity (ecologically but also for us personally). It was the starting point and at the heart



Sustainability was the starting point for the Bloms’ project



Hans, Suzanne and daughter Feline

of every decision we make. My wife and I talked about what we needed - it came down to budget, climate and the right environment.

After we chose our area in France, I spent months cycling along every single little road, talking to everyone - *maires*, farmers, shaking every tree, until I found the spot where I wanted to buy my plot.

Tell me about the construction of the houses themselves?

They are built with a wooden frame, the walls are straw bale walls, plastered and rendered with mud, and the flooring is cork. With straw you can make some really cool and artistic shapes. My one concession was building the foundations out of concrete. I reasoned that for my homes to be truly sustainable they need to last and the alternative ecological solution doesn't achieve that.

How did you manage the work?

At first friends helped me, but then we invited volunteers to come, with the understanding that I could show them how to do it for themselves. Now we rent out two of our places as *gîtes* and people love staying there. The materials mean that they are warm throughout the year. We use underfloor heating which utilises 2.5kw to heat the house for the whole day.

What does sustainability mean to you?

I feel strongly that this is the only life we have, so it is important to do something with it. We treat so many things with care, but not always the choices we make for our homes and environment. People don't listen to preachers, so we invite people to share our space with us and maybe they will be inspired to do something similar.

THE DIAGNOSTICS EXPERT

Diagnostiqueur immobilier Sofie Bertels (sb-diags.com) explains more about the energy certificate - the DPE (*Diagnostic Performance Energetique*), the survey that analyses the energy performance of a house. Since 2021, that survey has become much more in-depth and is legally required before advertising any house for sale.

Why is the DPE important?

The DPE informs the owner, buyer or tenant of a property about its energy consumption



Energy expert Sofie Bertels

and the quantity of greenhouse gases it emits. The document gives recommendations as how to reduce the energy consumption of the house and improve its comfort.

What are the main differences between the previous one and this one?

For properties built after 1948, the changes are relatively small. For older properties however, the calculation method has changed altogether and the result is a much more detailed survey that takes into account all of the

characteristics of the property. The government has also made the survey enforceable, where it was only informative before.

Why do you think the changes were made?

With sustainable living gaining more and more importance in our society, the government wants to enforce the reliability of the DPE so it can play a real part in promoting energy-efficient homes. Homes with bad ratings will soon have to undergo an *audit énergétique* before being put on the market.

What do you think is the most important thing to change?

Insulation is extremely important, and with the government aid over the last couple of years, many families have been able to improve that aspect of their home. In many houses, ventilation has been overlooked, and there is nearly always room for improvement.

What are the main challenges with old houses?

Their specific characteristics need to be taken into consideration when renovating: the thermal inertia, walls that need to breathe to regulate their humidity... Some improvements that are easy to carry out in a modern house are just not possible in an old stone village house.

“A more energy-efficient way of living has provided us with a new level of comfort and cheaper bills”

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

THE TERA PROJECT -

a sustainable community in Tournon d'Agénais, Lot-et-Garonne - takes the idea of sustainability to the ultimate level, a utopian ideal.

Its mission statement sounds like many others: 'TERA's *raison d'être* is to create the material and immaterial conditions for everyone to experience the path to their own happiness while respecting humans and nature'.

The fundamental difference is that they have turned this mission statement into reality. The project has the buy-in of local and central government, local people and is all-encompassing in its scope, touching on every aspect of life, including its own currency. It is also a model that is being

emulated in other parts of France. We talked to Tera member Laura Mazières about her experience.

Are you one of the directors?

Actually there are no directors; the project doesn't follow a traditional hierarchical structure, it's a community where everyone works on an equal footing, bringing what they can offer and are rewarded equally. I work for the grocery store (*l'Épicerie l'Alvéole*) which opened a year ago; Tera began life seven years ago.

Tell me about Tera?

The project is a complex economic model using a local currency that is called *l'abeille* (the bee), which is really

important for us - it means the money stays inside the local community. Each time you use euros, it goes to the financial market. Our local currency has to respect a moral charter. In France we have a saying that 'money has no smell'; here we say 'you know it smells good'.

Our local currency is used seven to 12 times more inside the territory than the euro. One bee is the same value as a euro.

What does sustainability mean for you?

It's about a life that works for everyone. There are now over 450 members of Tera and each one gets a base income paid in the local currency. This provides each member with basic needs such as housing, energy, water,

food and knowledge. For this community to be sustainable, individual members need to generate that income through economic activity that feeds back into the loop. So, for me, sustainability is providing the environment for that to occur.

Are you from the area?

No, most of us come from cities such as Toulouse and have come to this area to be able to contribute in this way. For these local communities to survive, they need people like us to reanimate the land. Rural France cannot be reduced to empty villages where half the houses are seldom-used holiday homes. Sustainability has to be about long-term engagement with your environment.

Can you ever achieve an A rating?

Yes, but you need a combination of good insulation, efficient ventilation and heat pumps for heating and hot water, ideally solar assisted.

What does sustainable living mean for you?

It means doing all we can to reduce our consumption of plastic, meat and energy. It means making informed decisions about our lifestyle and always considering how it will affect our carbon footprint.

COMFORT AND CHARACTER

Pauline and Ken Johnson have lived in France for over 20 years. They moved from a draughty old farmhouse in Wales to a large stone property in the south of France and now live in a modern house with a bespoke geothermal system supplying their energy.



Pauline Johnson

What made you decide to buy this property?

We saw it first online; its AA energy performance rating immediately attracted us. When we went around to look at it, we also liked the location as it was protected from the wind, with fabulous views and was quite different from what we were used to.



Pauline's home in the south of France has geothermal heating

Why was the AA rating so important to you?

Our previous houses were really lovely old buildings with high ceilings and bags of character. We had had a lovely time but, both in Wales and France, despite the warmer summers, in the winter it is very hard to heat such big volumes of space.

We moved to the south of France to enjoy the weather and we both appreciate being warm. Our previous house wasn't well insulated as it was built over 100 years ago. We were also running a gîte business and when we decided to change jobs we realised it was far too big for us so rather than invest in insulating our home we decided to look for another one instead.

What heating systems do you have and what makes your house so energy efficient?

The property has a geothermal system. We had read about it but never seen one in France. The way it works is that rods are buried into the ground around the house containing liquid which circulates and heats up to the same temperature as the soil (the ambient temperature underground is always between 12-14°C). That heated liquid circulates back to a system which only has to raise the temperature a few degrees before feeding the central heating system.

The central heating system is underfloor heating, both on the ground and first floor. Another boiler produces hot water fed back from the same system to feed our hot water. Our electricity bills are lower than any bills we paid before, despite now having electric blinds, a pool house, pump and a big surface area.



€1,837,500

AGEN, LOT-ET-GARONNE

A completely renovated property with nine bedrooms spread across a large main house and a guest cottage. Sits in 15ha of park with luxurious modern features including automatic gates, alarm, video surveillance, underfloor heating by heat pump, double-glazing, electric shutters, hot tub, solarium and a swimming pool.



€262,000

MONTRÉAL, AUDE

This three-bedroom house is in a quiet location on an old domaine. It was fully modernised in 2009 with a new roof, double-glazing, underfloor heating and solar panels for hot water. A double height living room leads out onto a sizable garden with terrace.

How, practically, have you experienced the difference?

Well, Ken just shouted out we wear fewer clothes, but joking aside, we are both always barefoot, we never need to stick a jumper on and never feel cold, or hot, summer or winter. It's just not something we even think about.

For you, what does sustainable living mean?

It's not about saving the planet, we all know we need to find ways to reduce our energy consumption. Nor is it about sacrificing ourselves, quite

the opposite, achieving more energy-efficient ways of living has provided us a new level of comfort, cheaper bills and a happier lifestyle. If I were to move again, the number one thing I would look at is the energy rating of the property. ■

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