

Estelle Marandon Gesa Hansen Charlotte Huguet

COMING HOME TO NATURE

*The French Art of
Countryfication*



Flammarion

COMING HOME TO NATURE

To our children:
Lou, Finn, and Romy
Adele, Viktor, and Jacques
Leonardo and Solal
Issa and Aden

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2020, when the idea for this book was born, I had just made the leap and left Paris to join my friends Gesa and Charlotte in the Forest of Fontainebleau—a region around 40 miles (60 km) southeast of Paris—where they’d been living for a while. Moving to the country was a revelation in many ways, a breath of fresh air in the midst of a dismal year. I suddenly had access to a world of dreams that I had been forced to abandon in the city. A spacious house, a garden with inviting nooks and crannies, even a bit of forest. And, above all, a more peaceful existence.

Gesa, an interior and furniture designer, Charlotte, a stylist, and I, a lifestyle journalist, got together frequently during that period, all three of us happy to be living in the beautiful countryside. We often discussed our new rustic way of life; it was clear that we were by no means alone in wanting to reestablish our ties with nature and its simple pleasures. The exodus of urbanites to the countryside had become a social phenomenon, and we noticed that more and more newcomers were arriving in our midst—people like us. It was a form of rural gentrification. Families were abandoning their urban lifestyles to live on the city’s outskirts, a trend we later began to call “countryfication.” This was how and why we arrived at the idea for this book and joint project. We wanted to create the kind of guide that we would have loved to have consulted before making this major transition ourselves; one that could hopefully help those who dream of a different life, but are concerned about taking the plunge. Or for those who already live in the countryside, but still find themselves wondering about the best way to take advantage of their situation while retaining their individuality.

The fantasy of country living is replete with clichés. It’s not all necessarily what you’d expect, and the changes can be more radical than you might have anticipated. The need for a car, distances and driving times, and strict schedules are all constraints that will be addressed in this volume. When we moved here, Mathieu and I followed our instincts without asking ourselves too many questions. We had a lot of luck (but then again, don’t we create our own luck?), and so far everything has gone better than we expected. But shifts like this aren’t easy



for everyone. I recently met a young mother for whom the adventure lasted only six months. She missed the city too much and realized she'd made a mistake. We also wished to relate less successful experiences like this one in these pages.

There are, in our opinion, certain realities you should be aware of before packing your bags. Needless to say, there's much to learn and explore in this new way of life. A country house is not a small, cozy apartment that can be managed in no time—it can be a long-term and time-consuming project. And the rhythms of country living are far removed from the hyperactive pace of large cities.

We will try to address all the questions that are sure to come up sooner or later for anyone who has decided to abandon urban life to retreat to a more remote location. There are the wider questions: What is country living actually going to be like? What will it mean for your daily existence (and your children's)? And there are also more prosaic topics to consider. How do you start a fire without burning tons of newspaper? Where can you find a well-constructed henhouse that won't lower the tone of your lovely new garden? How can you attractively furnish all that additional square footage of dwelling space without incurring financial ruin? And how can you maintain a touch of distinction while cultivating a rural style?

—Estelle





I

—

TRANSFORMING
YOUR LIFE



A DIFFERENT RHYTHM

Saturday, 7 a.m., Paris. After a tiring week, I fantasize about a lazy morning, but my children are shrieking in the room next door as if their lives were in danger. My older daughter has apparently gone nuts because her brother stuck a sticker on the wrong way. Their own room is a wreck, and now they're wreaking havoc in the living room, and jumping up and down on the floor. The downstairs neighbors are going to kill us, I think to myself while trying to get these urchins dressed as quickly as possible to escape to the playground a ten-minute walk away. No time to brush teeth. Once on the sidewalk, the children whizz off, precariously balanced on their scooters. I experience a near heart attack every time they charge straight through a traffic signal. On the way back, my heavy shopping bag is slung across my back and the two-year-old is draped across my shoulders. I haul myself painfully up five flights of stairs—the elevator is still out of order. It's just 10 a.m., and I could easily go back to bed. I'm not even forty yet but I'm constantly exhausted, and I can't believe that we're still living in the same three-room apartment with our three children, despite earning a decent salary. Every weekend, I torture myself with those perfect couples in their charming houses featured in interiors magazines like *Milk* and *AD & Co*, and secretly dream of a different life.

All of that wasn't so long ago. But then I decided to take the plunge and leave the city for the country.

It may be a bit of a cliché, but these days the weekends are different. In the morning, I hear . . . birds. The children still shriek—you can't expect miracles—but now they're far away, up in their bedrooms under the eaves. We don't go grocery shopping every day—we've learned how to stock the pantry. Sometimes we don't leave the house for two whole weeks. The rhythm of life here is very different from the city, but that's just what we'd been hoping for: quieter mornings and a life that's incontrovertibly more serene. I'll admit that this slower pace has some disadvantages. We realized that on our first day when we went to the village grocery at 5:00 in the afternoon, thinking they'd still have baguettes. Last-minute shopping is unfortunately a thing of the past. In the country, you have to be organized and plan a bit in advance (but perhaps it's about time we grew up). Supermarkets aren't open 24/7, and they're not necessarily around the nearby corner—you'll probably have to take the car. But that's a small price to pay for all you gain when you live far from the city.

SEEING THE SKY

Each of us left Paris for different reasons and in different ways. Charlotte made the move in 2013, following her husband at a time when few people were dreaming of country life. Her friends thought she was very brave, and she stood out as the exception to the norm. Gesa did the same thing, but more gradually, initially investing in a weekend house that was slowly converted into the family's principal residence. And I abandoned my former life abruptly during the Covid crisis, transforming my existence in just four months. But we had the same longings at heart, the same needs, the same dreams. We wanted a big house, space to entertain friends, a garden where the children could play outdoors, and the chance to live a calmer life attuned to nature.

Everything moves so fast in the city. We really didn't have time to take advantage of and enjoy all it had to offer. At any rate, we weren't doing so anymore. Each day, we labored through the relentless routine of *métro, boulot, dodo* (a French expression meaning "subway, job, sleep" that denotes the daily life of Parisians), which has the capacity to erode marital happiness. We had a vague awareness of what was going on, without really grasping the extent to which we'd nearly lost all connection with the natural world. During our first few days in the country, all three of us at various moments found ourselves mesmerized by the sky, so spectacular and majestic, looming silently above us. When we crossed the fields, we not only saw the heavens, but also the horizon. A miracle. Had we ever taken time to contemplate the sky in Paris? Surrounded by buildings, we'd practically forgotten it existed. Melancholy gray rainy days, which had seemed so dismal in the city, were now almost our favorites. Dark clouds engulfed the daylight in these dramatic, stormy interludes, and various shades of blue and gray commingled in a fathomless watercolor. Nature, the enchantress, reminded us of the magic of the seasons, with showers, wind, and the gift of spring sunshine to drive away winter's chill.



A RETURN TO OUR ROOTS

If someone had told us hardcore Parisians that we'd one day live in isolated little villages with scarcely a thousand inhabitants, we would have burst out laughing. There are no trendy vegan cafés here, no concept stores or wine bars, no movie theaters or museums. But, amazingly enough, we don't miss any of those things, and we'd be the first to admit how surprised we are. Before we took this leap, all three of us dreaded being far from everything. We feared being removed from the city and its amusements; we thought that we'd want to return to Paris all the time, that we'd waste hours and wear ourselves out in long trips by train or car. It turned out to be just the opposite. We found we didn't dread the trip after all. (We'll talk about this later.) If we wanted to see our city friends, we just had to plan ahead a bit and get organized. But actually, the obsession with going to the city evaporated faster than we would have thought possible. In the country, you're content with less, and for us that has been a huge benefit. The simplest things give us pleasure: watching the children playing naked in the garden, creating an herb garden, collecting autumn leaves, gathering the first apples from the orchard, or planting a tree and watching it grow with the passing seasons. Gesa always says that "in the country, there are twelve seasons." Surrounded by greenery, serenaded by birdsong, you realize how the world is in perpetual motion. There's something reassuring in observing the cycles of nature, and having no influence over them.

This return to simpler things calls for a bit of humility, and sometimes a measure of self-denial. Our preoccupation with objects, decor, and beautiful things has transformed into something more immediate and functional. We actually began to wonder exactly what it was that had kept us so firmly attached to our former lives. It reminded me of that quotation attributed to Sigmund Freud in his last days: "I've wasted my time. All that matters in life is gardening."



