Hi, and welcome to our life. On these pages is everything we’ve learnt over the years, whilst travelling a path towards finding meaning to why we exist. Stuff like – having our own ideas, living without a job, being responsible for our own health, making/growing all we need, and above everything, doing it in a way which is as sustainable as possible.

We are Maureen and Phil Rooksby. Originally from South London, but quickly moved to the lovely village of Stony Stratford in Milton Keynes (during the city’s formative years). Followed by the wilds of North Yorkshire, where we first became inspired by the ideas of self-sufficiency. Then sold that, lived in a van, spending the next nine years travelling in search of the one place in the world perfect enough to live the rest of our lives. Exploring: NW Spain/ Portugal/ an island in British Columbia (Canada)/ and finally SW Spain. In the last of which we found El Pocito, where we could:

- live without debt. No mortgage/ rent/ utility bills/ or any other charge on our time, and the natural resources to build not only a home, but provide all our own food/ fuel/ other building materials/ electricity/ medicine/ plus earn us the small amount of cash we would need.

- have our own water supply. We wanted a spring, but they are
hard to find so settled on a borehole, where the water is as natural/ unpolluted/ and plentiful as possible.

- **be way above sea-level.** +/- 600 metres. A lot less extreme climate (all-year-round)/ humidity is lower/ pollution less/ and there’s absolutely no risk from flooding.

- **south-facing.** Having tried all the other options this is undoubtedly the best. For crops / minimising frost damage/ solar & wind power/ as well as being a lot warmer and lighter indoors.

- **have the soil as sandy as possible.** All the others just make the job a lot harder.

- **put a distance between us and the neighbours.** The minimum is 200 metres, here we are currently 2 km from our nearest. The local town no further than walking distance. With +/- 500 people. The nearest city at least 100 km (60 miles) away ~ Sevilla.

- **be well away from roads and all the other health hazards.**

- **enjoy a climate where** we could grow the widest range of crops all-year-round.

- **have the perfect house.** Create the most practical/ healthy/ and inspirational living space possible.

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regular income. Leading us down yet another path, that once again took over our lives putting our search on hold, as we searched for more opportunities to sell. We built a stall, took it to the beach throughout the summer/local fiestas/Christmas markets (we even held one of our own). It was glamorous and like being on holiday all the time. But only for a short while. Most of these events don’t start until very late then continue through the night, so we lost all of the next day catching up on sleep, and that soon gets you down (it’s not natural). Also the kind of punter that goes to these things, on the whole, isn’t interested in knitted cats. Still we gave it our best effort, and that’s what matters. Because when you do go that extra mile, with a single-minded purpose and passion, until it produces this even if the odds are stacked against you, it always leads to something. This time it was discovering that ANYTHING we put our minds to would work, no matter how off-the-wall it sounded. This is powerful stuff. Maureen stopped worrying about where the money would come from and concentrated solely on what she wanted to create next. And from that moment was born the solution we’d been looking for. It’s called Monkey and Sofia. And through the website of the same name (http://monkeyandsofia.wordpress.com) we sell what we make, so no more time wasted with a stall. But here’s the twist, nothing we make now is for profit, it’s all priced only to cover the costs (of materials/postage/wear & tear on tools/etc). Nothing else added. And if you think this is just plain stupid, read on.

**Monkey & Sofia** (named after two of our cats) is not just about toys, it’s about everything we do here – the house/ garden/ writing/ anything else we may get into in the future. This is because, like nature, nothing works properly unless it has been woven inextricably and seamlessly into all the other parts. An ongoing process of distilling one’s experiences/ thoughts/ and ideas, then focussing them with a single-minded purpose and passion, until it produces this method but taking it one step further, by incorporating as many natural and ecologically sensitive features as possible. Though when I visited there wasn’t much to see as work hadn’t actually started. This proved providential, because they were also hoping to find volunteers, and that’s how I ended up working there for nearly a year, helping to build one of the houses. It was an experience unlike any other, and I recommend anyone who is thinking of self-build (or training to be an architect) to do the same. Unlike convention construction it begins with the frame (no foundations required), which in this case was formed first on the ground, flat, from massive lengths of timber, in much the same way as barns were in the USA, then lifted (using a giant crane) and secured into position by inserting the floor joists. The roof was done next, followed by the walls. That was the first stage, which took no more than a few weeks, after which we had a weather-proof shell to work on the rest. None of us had ever done anything like this before, yet it was really straightforward. All you needed was to be able to measure accurately, because even on a scale as big as this (a three-storey building) a few millimetres can make all the difference. I still haven’t forgotten to check three times before sawing, or how to test for squareness. Oh and you have to be raw physical strength and stamina. Not only to haul the timber around, often single-handedly, and across very muddy and uneven terrain. But to drill/ saw/ nail and bolt for hours on end, often whilst bent double/ perched on a ladder/ balancing on a beam/ or wobbling about on the roof. Often in the worst sort of weather too. Winter was awful. Always below freezing, often snowing. There was nowhere warm to thaw out, no adequate kitchen for that all-important supply of hot drinks and meals required to sustain us, and no proper toilet facilities either. Never have I been so exhausted. But at least I got to go home each night,
that of designing and building it ourselves. Self-build. I don't know how many years of pointless lectures at an equally uninspiring higher educational establishment it takes to be an architect, but once we discovered books like Lloyd Kahn's seminal work SHELTER (0-89815-364-6), in the now sadly defunct Compendium Bookshop (Camden Town, London), we were already miles ahead. Amazingly, SHELTER is still in print, and there's even a sequel — HOME WORK (0-936070-33-1) - as well as TINY HOMES, all by the same author. Packed with wonderful houses, built by their owners, often without any previous experience or skills, mainly from the 1970's and in the USA, still, sharing all the same ideals as ours. The classic reference though, which I discovered by chance, misfiled in what used to be the best library ever — Leeds Central (Reference & Art) - until local politicians meddled with it, is PATTERN LANGUAGE by Christopher Alexander et al (0-19-501919-9). This copy had been lying on the shelves unnoticed for over twenty years before I took it out, yet contains all the practical advice you'd ever need. Not only in terms of the rooms, but how each kind of space functions best, incidentally predating Feng Shui in the UK by several decades and making far more sense. There is also a section on how to design outdoor spaces.

Our next break was hearing about a novel self-build project, in central Leeds, the construction of three Walter Segal houses. A system named after its deviser, who was working for the London borough of Lewisham (in more enlightened times) and came up with the wonderful idea of getting prospective council tenants to build their own homes. Later his ideas were honed and made more widely known by a charity set up to promote them.

The three families who were building these were not only using his

whereas the owners were camping out in a temporary caravan. At one point the standpipe (our temporary connection to the mains water supply) froze and we ended up melting snow to make coffee. Even after ten years experience of working outside - planting trees/ digging ponds/ assembling polytunnels/ hauling tons of gravel - this still wasn't enough preparation. There was also the issue of safety. For even though we were rarely more than two or three working at any one time, the potential for getting hit/ cut/ or crushed seemed to be endless. Even kitted out with all the right gear, including a proper hard hat/ work gloves/ plus steel-toe-capped boots, I fell twice from the upper floors and got electrocuted. Any of which could easily have been fatal or worse. Add in the financial pressure, no time off for weekends or holidays, and not surprisingly it didn't become our system of choice.

Continuing our search, we encountered many other claims to self-build/ natural/ and ecological construction, including: straw-bale/ a wooden pyramid/ adobe/ adapting shipping-containers/ yurts/ tepees/ earth ships/ even a family who'd literally burrowed into the side of a hill with a JCB. None of which turned out to be anywhere near as easy/ healthy/ or cheap as claimed, but did at least teach us what to avoid. Just because a new idea sounds like it should be better doesn't automatically mean it is. Then having probably seen everything, the perfect system revealed itself. Tried-and—tested/ 100% natural/ all the materials can be found for free, typically on-site/ and makes all the rest seem ridiculously overworked. We had even lived in several, in Galicia/ the Alentejo (Portugal)/ and here in Andalucia. Because it's the traditional system of building throughout rural Europe.

In Galicia they are made from piedra (stone/ granite). Either using incredible and intense point of energy transforming itself into the output. It's such a powerful force, that when people see what we make/ visit our house/ our garden/ or read about how we live, they don't just see something in isolation, they are hit by the full expression of what it all means. The interconnections literally sewn into the fabric of the toys/ knitted across the rows of wool/ or mulched into the roots of our burgeoning edible forest. Which allows them to instantly appreciate what it is we're trying to do here, not just with our lives, but how our small part affects the planet. They want to treasure that, become part it, as a friend and by supporting us in any way they can. From which has grown this wonderful global village, peopled by every age and interest, who not only take the time to sit down and write regularly, but share their lives with us, offer seasoned advice, or whatever else it is they can do to help. Without them, our nine year journey of survival in such a foreign place, with no family or friends, little or no income, would not have been possible. They are our guardian angels, keeping us on the path. This is going to sound even more corny, but the whole point, the only point of being given a life isn't about what we want, but making every minute of that short existence count as an opportunity to change the world back to how it should be. And you start by opening your heart to nature and as many other people as possible. Because not only does this make a difference, in so many ways, it makes dreams come true as well. For us, for you, and a future for the planet.

The next time this happened was in Portugal. We'd vowed since never to get drawn into teaching again but still needed money. One our neighbours suggested Maureen sold the toys she'd been making as presents for friends (back in the UK). Book a stall at the local produce market on Saturdays, which was where everyone gravitated, and she would help with the introductions.

The last bit was to prove fortuitous, as (in both Portugal & Spain) before anyone will register you even exist they have to know - who you are/ where you come from/ entire family history/ educational and professional qualifications/ and who else from the town already knows you. I'm not kidding. Maria took care of all that, the toys doing the rest. And they went down a storm. Folk flocked. First to look, then coming back to buy. Eventually they even asked if she could make other things, to order. It was a mad but truly exhilarating time, to discover finally that something you really enjoy for its own sake, and nothing to do with a job/ career, could turn out to be so satisfying AND the solution to earning money. And as we'd pretty much decided this was the area we wanted to stay in and search for land, it also really helped in getting to know the place and who everyone was, especially as we were camping several kilometres out of town. The only problem was it was also a very small town, in the middle of nowhere, and eventually everyone who was going to buy a knitted cat, had. Sales began to wane, just as we'd got used to the teachers it took no time for them to ask if we'd help the children with their english homework. Even less to say yes. Our need to feel part of somewhere, and learn some spanish, was so great this was the wanted classes, adults too, and our days became filled with preparation/ teaching/ or travelling.
adventure, taking us down a path we would never have guessed at otherwise.

In the beginning there was no choice. We were living in the van, on the move every day and needed to buy fuel/ food/ and all the other basics. Our original budget allowed for three months searching for land, during which we would live off the tiny amount of interest generated by our precious capital. After that the land would provide. It didn’t work out like that. Santiago de Compostela, our zone of choice, was so awful we kept on driving. At the same time the interest rate crashed to less than 1%. And our living as nomads, went on for another nine years.

At first it was a real nightmare. The whole process of acclimatisation, getting used to – no longer having any possessions/ our home being nothing more than an old van/ being physically and emotionally adrift/ rudderless/ separated from friends & family, even anyone we could talk with/ in a very odd and confusing (though never frightening) culture – meant that for a short time at least our spending spiralled out of control. And in no time we were prepared to do virtually anything to earn some money and feel rooted somewhere, rather than admit it was a huge mistake and having to head back, a chunk of our precious capital lost forever. Even if that meant teaching. Not something we’d even considered, let alone wanted to do, especially not being able to speak (or understand) a word of the language, but it turns out the education system (right up to and including university) is so appallingly bad, beyond belief actually, there is an insatiable need for anyone to help. A group of parents persuaded us. We’d turned up (seemingly from another planet) in Andalucia. Scraping in third (Huelva, the regional capital, 100 km south of us is a hell-hole, tagged the dustbin of Europe. Much nearer, just 20 km from here, copper mining has resumed), but enough of the positive to put down roots. We also had to scale down the amount of land, to 2.5 hectares. This has not proved a problem so far, as it is going to take many years to develop, but if in the meantime we do need more, all the land around us is currently for sale.

UK. Then selling the house freed us from buildings cover. Contents took a little longer, as our insurer was prepared to let us continue while travelling (including health) for the same price. Until we made a claim. That was a scary moment, discovering insurance in Spain (& Portugal) isn’t anything like the same. Since then we’ve had none. If the house does burn down we’ll have to do what they do in Canada, when you need a dentist/ optician/ etc, learn to live without.

Other than that, there isn’t much else we need money for. Living in the middle of nowhere means there are few shops, none of them with anything you’d want. Our nearest big town is Sevilla, 120 km away, but has now got too expensive to visit except by hitching, and doesn’t offer much more in the way of choice anyway, just a nice change of scene. The only real temptation is across the border in Portugal – to see our friends in Odemira/ the coffee & cakes/ hardware shops/ and of course the markets, which are like nowhere else. These are one of the real gems of living here. Once a month they appear. A caravan of white vans from who knows where, to set up a tented village of stalls selling everything you could imagine, but at a fraction of the price in the shops. They can do this because either they are selling their own hand-crafted produce, direct. Or they’ve bought from the manufacturer, again no middle-men. The latter is a particularly interesting phenomenon. Portuguese may not have much of its old manufacturing industry left, but what has survived is still renowned globally for quality, supplying most of the best-known brands. They also specialise in what are known as overruns. This is not counterfeit, but where the factory makes a bit more than the buyer is aware of in order to sell on to the market mafia. Real bargains like remnants of designer-label upholstery fabric at 50p a metre. Designer-label fashions such as jeans for £10. With those and the US-style thrift stores (far better than the charity shop) were way beyond our tiny budget. Canada has it all, oodles, but immigration was impossible. Thankfully then we came across Andalucia. Scraping in third (Huelva, the regional capital, 100 km south of us is a hell-hole, tagged the dustbin of Europe. Much nearer, just 20 km from here, copper mining has resumed), but enough of the positive to put down roots. We also had to scale down on the amount of land, to 2.5 hectares. This has not proved a problem so far, as it is going to take many years to develop, but if in the meantime we do need more, all the land around us is currently for sale.

OUR HOUSE - INSIDE

Basiclly it’s just one big room with no divisions (42 m² ÷ 6 x 7 m), apart from one corner (1.5 x 1 m) that has been partitioned by two low walls, currently serving as our larder. The benefits of a single space being – we can endlessly change what is the kitchen/ sitting room/ bedroom/ and office. There is far more natural light (with at least one window in every wall and two skylights on the roof, though more of the latter would have been even better). And heating the entire space is much easier, requiring just one small wood stove.

When we began the renovation, by knocking out all the existing internals walls and ceilings, there was more than a worry whether it would work (particularly structurally), but it is exactly as we hoped. Taking out the ceiling has also opened up the potential for using the vertical space, which we’ve begun to utilise by building our bed up on a platform, creating valuable storage underneath. All in all it’s the best home we’ve ever had.

THE WALLS are made from large pieces of stone (all found on-site), faced inside with a layer of local brick. On top is a skim of local cal/
material along with any equally insidious method of dressing it up as something it isn’t and a lot more valuable, followed by spending whatever it takes to make sure we are convinced we can’t live without it. Regardless that the providence of the ingredients/methods used to produce them, and subsequent claims made, might not be wholesome, safe, or even true (who is to know?). Oh yes, all those really yummy good-for-you treats like organic: fresh pasta/noodles/rice cakes/tofu/crisps/peanut butter/bombay mix/frozen organic chips/ketchup/vegetable pate/tamar/tahini/shoyu/baked beans/veggie burgers/soya mayonnaise/miso/soup cubes/green tea/wholemeal bread/flour/breakfast cereal/soya ice-cream/soda/wine & beer/et al. Turns out there’s really no difference between them and toxic waste. Even when they come certified organic, it means nothing any more. Wholefood shops aren’t any different ethically to international supermarket chains. Worker’s co-ops any happier places to work. Not one of the people who has to grow any of this stuff ever gets a fair deal. Box schemes suck. ALL of this is just about making money. Just that.

Other outgoings. Transport. This hasn’t been so easy. We sold the van, eventually. Had to, as it wasn’t legal with a UK registration. But then ended up buying another, albeit a smaller one. Sold that when we went to Canada. Came back to Spain and lived here for a year without (hitching mainly), which was too hard. Then found El Pocito and really needed a vehicle. It’s the cheapest/oldest one we’ve ever owned, but still expensive to insure/tax/MOT. The good news is our mileage has dropped significantly recently, down to about 600 miles a year. Thanks to walking (town is only 35 minutes away) and cycling (10 mins).

Insurance used to be another drain, especially when we lived in the
second-hand laptop. We paid mostly standing charge, typically around £10 a month. Likewise for gas, as we only had the cooker from our van, one 13 kg bottle lasting 10–12 weeks, the replacement £12. We were never asked to pay community charge. Nor for water, as it usually had to be brought ourselves from the nearest spring. Likewise sewage, none of the places were on the mains. Instead of a phone we relied on the postal service (two days to the UK, four to the USA/ Canada), phone boxes, and free wi-fi access in local bars/libraries for email/Skype.

Our biggest expenditure was on food. And this is where we’ve made our greatest savings yet, even without the harvest from our garden. At first thanks to our new neighbours, who instantly treated us as one of their family, always making sure we had enough to eat, for which we repaid the kindness with what we had – use of our van/time/skills/whatever they needed and whenever. No mention was ever made of this strange arrangement but it worked really well, honed as it must have been from some very hard and lean times. And I was particularly impressed that they didn’t use any of that judgemental crap (valuation/validation) that forms the basis for the more right-on versions – LETS and barter. The most noticeable savings though have happened since, from a dramatic change in diet. Mainly the decision to cut out anything processed (ie made by someone else), including alcohol. Not just because it’s a lot more expensive, but turns out it’s not very healthy either. Which was a profound moment. Up until then we really did believe we’d got it all so utterly right – shopping only at ethical/ecological and co-operatively owned enterprises, supporting an alternative and greener economy because it would make a difference and be a lot better for us. When it turns out the only reason ANY of this really nasty stuff exists is because someone somewhere has discovered a really cheap source of raw

the Alentejo. Where unlike what we’d been used to, they manage on as little as a third or quarter. Where unemployment touches everyone. Comparable goods & services cost a lot more. And the typical household has only one wage-earner, to support not only his/her immediate family, but up to three generations of the extended family as well. Once you learn how to survive like that, you never need be dependent on a salary ever again.

During our time in Yorkshire, the greatest part of Maureen’s earnings went on paying the mortgage and repairing/decorating our house. This is unique to the UK. In Spain & Portugal until very recently, most people never had a mortgage/loan/paid rent. They lived at home with their parents their entire lives.

The home. Within living memory this was purely a place to eat and sleep. Often owned by the employer (in lieu of wages), and very basic. During the day everyone was out at work (in the fields or factories), after which they moved on to the bar where they stayed until the last possible moment. And while the advent of television has exposed them to a whole other world, including interior design, very little has changed, most homes remain dark (windowless)/bleak/functional/and cold. They are also in a constant state of disrepair. One of our earliest memories of N Spain was the vast number of half-finished houses, yet with families living in them while upstairs had no walls or roof. In Portugal a neighbour lived in a tent for six months, while she and her son replaced their roof together. This is not unusual, though even we were shocked to discover she was her in her eighties at the time.

Furnishings haven’t caught on either. I have yet to see a single fitted carpet, even in a shop, or wallpaper. Curtains are a rarity.

HEATING
During the entire time spent searching Spain and Portugal we lived without any heating whatsoever. This might not sound a hardship until you appreciate how cold it gets here, with frost even snow. So having a wood-burner now is a real treat. Plus there are plenty of trees to coppice, including pine which come with the added bonus of cones aplenty, excellent fire-lighters. As is our endemic weed, cistus laudanifer, which is harvested when the regular brushing institutes are done. We had wood stoves in Yorkshire, the best of which were MORSØ. Sadly it is impossible to buy them here (we gave up trying), so have settled for the national brand HERGOM instead. They make a very similar range (price too), but that’s where any comparison ends. The latter is appalling. Ours even arrived broken, which took a further two months to resolve. The glass then cracked, more hassle. Followed by the discovery that it simply doesn’t work as a stove should. There’s no primary air control, which means it never gets really hot, so only very thin logs can be used, plus soot builds up and falls back blocking the flue. To clear/clean the chimney requires total dismantling. In a word – nightmare.

ELECTRICITY
We chose El Pocito, among all the other reasons, because there was no mains supply or possibility of being offered one in the future. We wanted to be free from EMF radiation and reckoned it would be a lot cheaper to generate our own. The full story is on the alternative energy page. Briefly though, we have succeeded, and with the minimum outlay (1000 euros). Comprising:
- two solar panels, each rated at 50 watt 12 volt DC, wired to generate 100 watts at 12 volts,
- one second-hand 12 volt DC car battery, rated at 180 Ah,
- a charge controller/ regulator.

Then came the tank. We had no idea what size would be necessary, nor did anyone else, so made a wild guess at 5000 litres, the same as the old water tanks we’d seen on nearby farms (used for irrigation). But as it was prohibitively expensive to buy and install a load of brick, and we needed it sealed, a fibre-glass substitute was chosen. For some reason (still a mystery) we were told the nearest supplier was in Sevilla (120 km away), and in the way of things here, from then on nothing went as planned. We ordered what we needed, and what arrived were totally different (3 m tall instead of 3 m wide). It came on a low-loader which couldn’t make the last 2 km of our track, so the driver just left it there on the side of the road, where it remained until the local builder’s merchant took mercy on us and used their (ordinary) lorries to bring it the rest. A plinth then had to be constructed, followed by a brick chimney to surround the tank, to keep it cool in summer/from freezing in winter. By then we had paid out more than it would have cost to build the traditional way. Connecting it up we used 50 m x 40 mm pipe on the way up to the tank, and 50 m x 25 mm back down to the house. The height difference is 11 m, which gives us an operating pressure of 1.1 bar (fine for a sink or irrigation system). Water is brought to the surface by a submersible pump (SHURFLO 9325 – 24 volt DC), powered by two solar panels (@ 80 watts each, wired to run at 24 volts). Choosing this system was yet more guesswork, as neither we or anyone else locally had any experience of these pumps. In hindsight I think we have been rather lucky – it’s only had to be replaced once/ the mount for the panels twice/ ditto the float-switch. In the end we took out the float switch (in the tank), and in its place installed a switch in the house (which currently only works intermittently), along with a pressure gauge plumbed into the kitchen sink. When this works properly it will allow us to decide when to turn on the pump (ie when there is sufficient sun), while also revealing – exactly how much water there is in the tank (a first), how
- and a 220/240 volt AC inverter to enable us to run conventional appliances. On a sunny day (Andalucia has an average of 300 a year) we can recharge our battery (for evening use) within an hour, then are free to use appliances directly off the panels (up to a maximum of 50 watts).

**WATER**

This has been by far our biggest headache. It took ten months from moving in to get a single drop, and even now there are still wrinkles to sort out. While we waited for the process of granting a licence (to drill a borehole), all our water had to be brought in from town. 100 litres a day (1 litre equaling 1 kg), the last half a kilometre by wheelbarrow. We were also required to present a proposal, a vast document of totally pointless technical information, which has to be drawn up by an accredited engineer and costs 600 euros. Granting permission is totally dependent on that. Weeks then months pass, no-one visits, the only contact we have is an occasional frisson of a registered letter requesting additional highly technical information. This has to be found and delivered in person within seven days to their office in Huelva (a 300km round trip). Failure to do so and the application can be terminated. We waited nine months, by which time our copy of the correspondence had grown to three inches thick.

Drilling came next. The contractors in this business have it sewn up. No competition/ no guarantees/ and they charge by the metre, minimum fee (cash only) 60 metres. It's done with a machine like a JCB, which in turn is connected to an even bigger compressor. To reach the minimum took them two days, during which we were deafened and showered by rock dust. Luckily they hit water first time. JCB, which in turn is connected to an even bigger compressor.

Our first breakthrough came while looking for a house to rent. When you've been trapped in a van for as long as we have and not on holiday, where it's always either very cold/ damp/ or unbearably hot, then anywhere you can't touch the floor/ walls/ and ceiling at the same time is a luxury. Without exaggeration we moved into something not unlike a shed and felt blessed. It had 25 m² of floor space/ no bathroom/ no hot water, and was exactly the kind of place we hoped to build for ourselves. It was also really cheap, the average paid over the nine years was £90 a month.

**Appliances and utilities.** Occasionally there was the luxury of mains electricity, but no appliances. Our use for it was therefore very limited, to lights and watching second-hand dvds (films) on our - and a 220/240 volt AC inverter to enable us to run conventional appliances.

- light fittings are generally no more than the bare wires poking out of a wall/ ceiling from which a bare bulb dangles, or worse a florescent tube. Apart from the ubiquitous IKEA, all the shops (out in the country/ or in town/ city) sell more or less the same – shoddily made/ uncomfortable/ ugly/ and outrageously expensive. Same goes for household appliances, though as most homes have a surplus of free labour (a role usually falling to the oldest members) it is more usual to do most jobs by hand. Thus, with this as our new perspective it should be no surprise to learn that we've found it relatively easy to change our ways. Affectionately known as the hovel approach to living.

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**Furniture.** None of the places we lived in over that time came with much more than a table and a few mismatched chairs. And as we were always moving on there wasn't the chance to acquire anything more. What we did do though was look for stuff people threw out and renovate that. Total outlay: nada.

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much we're using (another first), how long this takes to replace, and whether everything is functioning as it should (ditto). The only concern now (apart from the borehole drying up) is how to cope should anything breakdown in the summer when we need to irrigate every day. Installing a hand pump is the obvious answer, but at over 1000 euros beyond our current finances.

There still isn't any hot water plumbed in. Which is rather annoying given all this sun, and everyone back in the UK telling us how they've installed solar water heaters. But I have been working on it.

The first plan (MARK I) was to lay another 50 m of 25 mm black plastic water pipe, this time on top of the ground, so the sun could heat the water in that. Until I realised the heat would just go back in the opposite direction to the tank. That took me a year to solve, by which time I had come across a reference to water heated in plastic being toxic.

MARK II used a solar cooker to do the heating, simply replacing what most efficient being the parabolic/ satellite dish shape, which is a large reflective surface formed so it focuses the sun into the smallest point (like a magnifying glass), over which a saucepan or skillet rests, allegedly as efficient as a conventional cooker ring. To heat our 5 litres this way would take no time at all. I had been inspired after seeing one in Portugal, except at 300+ euros and of really poor quality. Light fittings are generally no more than the bare wires poking out of a wall/ ceiling from which a bare bulb dangles, or worse a florescent tube. Apart from the ubiquitous IKEA, all the shops (out in the country/ or in town/ city) sell more or less the same – shoddily made/ uncomfortable/ ugly/ and outrageously expensive. Same goes for household appliances, though as most homes have a surplus of free labour (a role usually falling to the oldest members) it is more usual to do most jobs by hand. Thus, with this as our new perspective it should be no surprise to learn that we've found it relatively easy to change our ways. Affectionately known as the hovel approach to living.

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**Furniture.** None of the places we lived in over that time came with much more than a table and a few mismatched chairs. And as we were always moving on there wasn't the chance to acquire anything more. What we did do though was look for stuff people threw out and renovate that. Total outlay: nada.

**Appliances and utilities.** Occasionally there was the luxury of mains electricity, but no appliances. Our use for it was therefore very limited, to lights and watching second-hand dvds (films) on our

money factor in order to see what your toil is actually worth. I'll save you the effort. What you get from a dependence on currency alone, in real terms, is just 1% of the stated gross salary.

Thankfully it doesn’t have to be like this, there are other options. One being self-sufficiency, where money hardly matters and everything you do is worth 100% of the time you put into it. First because it frees you from the rental/ mortgage trap. By allowing you to buy somewhere outright, a place that not only is a home but has the potential to provide for all your other needs too. And yes it is possible, but like anything else only if you are prepared to put in the time and effort to find it. Nor does it require a vast amount of capital. We for example had only one liquidable asset, a tiny house in the middle of nowhere. This was in 2000. It had half the mortgage left to run, the market was at its lowest point, and then we left the capital in the bank for another nine years (without interest). And still found this. Right now is actually the perfect time to buy property, prices have never been lower, sellers are desperate. We also needed money to live throughout those years. Not easy without a job. At the beginning it was really hard, especially cooped up in the van all the time. But as soon as we began to forget the life we’d left and started looking forward to what it would be like when we did find our land, things got a lot easier. At the same time worrying about never having enough money started to fade, and we began to enjoy discovering how to live on a lot less. Now we are experts at frugal living. So much so that when we hear what people earn and spend now in the UK, and the waste, it shocks us. Our quality of life has also risen dramatically. But I’m getting ahead here, none of what we’ve achieved would have been possible had it not been for the experience of living among the people of very different countries, places like the wild empty mountains of Galicia and the poorest region of Portugal,
Frugalism, the art of being a frugalist, or how to realign your life so it’s no longer dependent on earning money.

One of the main reasons why we’ve stuck at this path of wanting to simplify our lives, has been the dream of discovering how to rid the fear of ever not having enough money. As early as the sixth-form both of us already knew we didn’t want to be shackled by jobs, but what we felt even stronger was this totally new dread, that everything depended on us having one. Nobody had prepared us for this, neither our parents or all those wasted years of so-called education. Probably because the consensus still believes there is no choice, the moment you leave school you are on your own and had to cope. Luckily for us this was in the 1970s, a time of plentiful employment.

Around 10% of what you’re being asked to pay. But that’s not the end, you now have to combine the remuneration factor with the value for money factor, what you get for your money. Because when you try to spend this hard-earned currency the same depreciation effect/ deception kicks in all over again. With yet more tax, all the seller’s costs (things like rent/ equipment/ marketing/ employees/ and of course buying the stock/ materials), and then his profit/ salary. Typically this totals to around 90% of what you’re being asked to pay. But that’s not the end, you now have to cut or drill with hand tools (though in hindsight would have made a great base, half buried in the ground with its spindle sticking up and drive belt wheel as the support). Then I bought a 2 x 1 m sheet of galvanised steel (cost: £6) and started from scratch with that. Great stuff, cuts like card/ drills & files easily/ doesn’t rust/ and with chrome polish is almost as shiny as the real thing (or so I thought, more on that later). The first prototype took an hour to make. Subsequently I added bricks and a glass top to insulate it, and a revolving base to align with the sun. The shape of the reflector has evolved too. Currently I’m working on the MARK VI version. It heats water perfectly, will also bake bread/ biscuits, now I want to add cooking food as well (see our SOLAR COOKING page). For this it needs a far more reflective surface. The galvanised steel is good, but if it gets splashed by water is permanently dulled. The real ones use aluminium sheet, so I have to get a price for that next, or have it made from stainless steel, once I’m sure the design of the reflector is as perfect as possible.

The other big drawback is efficiency. Despite the hype you need a lot more sun than you’d think. For example, to bake bread requires a minimum temperature outside the cooker of 36 C. Likewise to get water anywhere near boiling. Which seriously limits its usefulness (though for us has neatly dovetailed in with the wood stove). I’m guessing, but anywhere more north than here, heating or cooking with the sun is not going to be worth the effort/ expense.

KITCHEN

Not a lot to say about this part of the house, as we hardly have one. Just the small butane stove taken from the van, the kind used in caravans/ boats, with two rings/ a grill/ and even underneath. All you need plus economical, I’d definitely recommend it over a heap after. Miraculously the bowl always remains clean afterwards, so all that’s required is a quick rinse with cold water. To be honest I had more worries about this aspect than anything else, but it’s proved fine, no disasters whatsoever. It’s also as comfortable as the usual toilet seat arrangement, plus allegedly more efficient at eliminating toxins/ plaque, which otherwise build-up causing major health problems (as a practitioner once explained to me – fat people are literally full of shit). The only difficulty was finding the right size bowl. It has to be small enough to fit between your feet, and deep enough to deal with the worst scenario. My current one is circular, 28 cm wide by 12 cm high. If you want the bidet experience as well, all you need is another bowl ready with some water to spritz with.

We don’t have a shower or bath either, not when there’s a much simpler method. A bowl, into which the juice of a lemon has been added, is filled with 2.5 litres of nearly boiling water, topped up with enough cold to prevent scalding, and placed on the floor. Next to that another bowl, large enough to stand/ squat in. Using a mitt or flannel, rub/ wash the entire body, starting from the top and working down (cleanest parts first). Finish by emptying the water onto your feet for a soak. That’s it. No rinsing required. All of which probably sounds very unhygienic and primitive, but having done this for twelve years now we can safely say it is as effective as conventional washing/ 100% non-toxic/ all the body’s essential oils are retained/ hair & skin stay softer/ and it’s a hell of a lot quicker and more pleasant done in front of the stove, or out on the porch, than any bathroom we’ve ever had.

WASTE (GREY) WATER

In the summer it ends up in a series of large buckets, used to irrigate the plants in pots each evening. We do this with a watering can (and
conventional hob/ oven. An industrial-type sink, freestanding, with space on one side for draining dishes/ food preparation. And that’s all. No other workspace. No electrical appliances.

**BATHROOM**

There isn’t one, no toilet either, nothing. Nor do we have plans to install any. Why? Because after the van experience they seemed so superfluous. This wasn’t our original plan, previously we’d wanted to do the whole eco water treatment and composting toilet thing. We’d even been to see some, read all the books, and gone on some pretty intensive residential courses. We’d even worked for the local water authority (in sewage treatment), so had plenty of hands-on experience. The sum of which percolated away until there was this blinding revelation, that all these systems, which we’re assured make waste water and sewage safe, don’t. It’s all a lie. Even the eco solutions. The only way to do this properly is to let nature take over. The unique combination it has to offer, of rain/ sun/ and micro-organisms. And not put anything unnatural into that system in the first place.

So what we do here now is this:
- not bring in anything that we can’t recycle/ compost ourselves.
- don’t waste any water, especially with a conventional toilet/ shower or bath.
- and bypassing the composting toilet (they don’t work and aren’t natural/ safe), peeing outside, in a bucket, which is then added to the waste water (more on that in a minute), pooping outside too. For us done under the cover of our porch, which is dry in all weathers and has an amazing view, by squatting on a bowl/ potty, into which wood shavings have been sprinkled (available for free from carpenters) to prevent adhesion, then upending that into the compost.

strainer to catch the bits), which is time-consuming but will work out a better way eventually. In winter a simple change of pipework directs it down to our large pond.

In the future we hope to add a pre-cleaning stage, a smaller pond just below the house, planted up with reeds and providing a habitat for the many frogs/ toads/ lizards/ snakes/ wasps/ flies/ and bees that currently use bowls we provide for them. Not that it needs treatment really, as nothing poisonous/ non bio-degradable has been introduced. Why industry hasn’t been forced to abide by this simple standard, and only produce products that conform to it, still continues to confound me.

**PAINTWORK**

There are just four (internal) walls that need painting. We’ve done them twice now, which took a day each time, using Cal (Calcium oxide)/ lime/ whitewash, spookily exactly the same stuff we did the house in the UK with except then it was called a natural/ ecological paint and cost a fortune. This time it came to 12 euros (£10). You can also buy it in the raw state which is even cheaper, as bits of rock. Though first it has to go through this really scary and very lethal chemical reaction, where it literally boils and is incredibly corrosive, so worth paying the extra. Painting with it is also rather novel. Firstly because it drips, so you need someone on hand to clean up the splashes, especially on bare wood which otherwise will turn permanently black. It also goes on clear, so unless you keep going at a fair pace you can’t see where you’ve been. Only when it dries does the brilliant white finish appear. Best bit though is the smell, there isn’t any, or toxicity, plus it’s permeable and antiseptic. Only real downside, it’s not washable.

and if it ever came to not having enough there was always squatting. Still it was very stressful. That’s why we immediately started looking for ways to lessen the burden, eventually escape the trap. If you have ever wondered what our precious short life is about, then this section is definitely for you.

If such a thing as evil does exist then money is it – the sole cause of ecological destruction and major reason why our species is so grossly overpopulated. Because those who came up with the idea (it’s not natural) did so for purely selfish reasons – to provide them with an endless supply of serfs like us and the cash to buy whatever their hearts desire. Then when that wasn’t enough, continued to refine it so now we give them back most of what we earn too. What we’re interested in here though is how they do it, because it’s so unbelievably naive and stupid anyone with an ounce of sense should be able to escape their evil clutches. All they’ve done (after forcing us off our own land) is to introduce the idea we need stuff (including children), then we did the rest, including making sure we draw our offspring into this awful circle of craving/ addiction/ and debt. By creating the pressure to conform, sending them to school, and allowing the power of the media to do the rest. Now everyone feels there really is a need to be part of something bigger, and willingly sacrifice their entire life in that fantasy.

**The money con.** We imagine it’s this transparent and fair exchange – my time in return for an agreed sum – then we’re free to go spend it as we like on goods/ services of an equal value. Wrong. What happens is this. Beginning with the remuneration factor, what we actually earn for our labour and sacrifices. Because instead of getting what was agreed (the gross amount), paid in weekly/ monthly instalments, the actual figure, after deductions, is little more than...
and replaced the air filter/ the brake is on/ the chain moves easily
on the bar/ and the retaining nut is fully tightened.

6) my biggest mistakes – ignoring smoke and scorch marks on the
bar (due to insufficient oil reaching the chain, a larger hole needed to
be drilled)/ and not understanding how to sharpen the chain properly.

The latter is hard, confounds even the experts. Either buy a machine
to do it or face working the thing out for yourself. A tree surgeon
showed me and I think I’ve got it now. To start with you really do
need the right size file. Then have a look at how the teeth are
arranged, alternately. Upend the saw, so it is balancing on the end
of the handle, and prepare to attack one side at a time. I used to
mark the first one with a red felt pen, but eventually you’ll see where
you’ve been as they shine afterwards. Keep the file aligned properly.
File outwards, and no more than one or two passes as the metal is
really soft. Do this EVERY time you finish using the saw (which for
me is an hour or 2-3 tanks of fuel). When you have done an entire
set of teeth in one direction, turn the saw and do the other.

7) other maintenance tips – when filling with the petrol/ oil mix
ALWAYS top up the chain oil reservoir too/ wash the air filter after
each session (in soapy water)/ change the petrol filter annually/
ever leave fuel in the machine for more than a month/ and
ALWAYS have someone nearby, just in case of an accident (I wear a
whistle as well).

Finally here are some of our favourite UK plant/ seed suppliers, just
in case you’ve not come across them before:

POYNTZFIE LD HERB NURSERY
(this is undoubtedly the best for herbs, and the owner is really helpful)
Black Isle, By Dingwall, IV7 8LX, Ross & Cromarty, Scotland
http://www.poyntzfieldherbs.co.uk

DEMETER SEEDS STORMY HALL (for organic veg & herb seeds)

enough to make liquid feed and tinctures with, I’ve also sowed some
seed of the wild version in the hope it will spread.

PROPAGATION
This is new for us too, but turns out to be so easy I wish we’d tried it
earlier. The first plants we attempted were rosemary and lavender.

We did this over successive months between Dec-Feb, simply by
cutting the fresh growth (about 3-4 inches) and putting them in pots
of compost (you can also just stick them in the ground). Kept damp
they were ready for transplanting the following autumn. I reckon any
woody shrub could be done this way. We also buried the ends of
plants, while still attached, and they rooted over the same period too.

We then experimented with fresh leaf cuttings, from softer stock/
perennials – chocolate mint/ sage/ and lavender, this time in early
summer. The lavender all died, but the other two, in homemade
propagators made from 5 ltr water bottles, fared better. The mint all
rooted, and about three-quarters of the sage. Full shade is essential.

GRAFTING
Never had a go at this before either, but our neighbours in Portugal
are old hands, using any root stock they can find. And as we have
many vigorous/ suckering wild fruit trees it seemed worth trying too.

A mention in the local bar brought two neighbours to show us. The
host tree should be young, with a thin trunk (though it still works on
older ones). This is then cut down to 3-4 ft and all the side shoots
removed. Across the cut a slit is made, either with a sharp knife or
very sharp axe, and a temporary wedge inserted to hold it open. Two
really fresh cuttings, trimmed to about 4-6 inches long, with their
ends sliced to form a wedge (the same depth as the cut), are then
slotted into place on either side of the cut, so they are flush with the
outside edge of the tree, and the wedge removed. Finish by covering
but eventually causes obesity and other major health problems.

That’s because all processed food, and fresh fruit/ veg/ meat, even
organic, including if you’ve grown it yourself, is totally unsuited to
providing what our bodies actually need. Over a very short space of
time (evolutionary speaking) we have replaced five million years of
eating nothing but what we could find growing wild (foraging), raw/
fresh/ and seasonal, with an industry (agriculture & food processing)
and habit of cooking/ mealtimes that has no connection with the
natural. Yet over this period of transition, we haven’t evolved
physiologically to be able to deal with this. Instead our bodies suffer
the eternal torment of being deprived the 20,000+ edible plants we
once grazed upon, replaced by just 20 new and totally manmade
versions. Consumed in ever more toxic combinations, and at a rate
that outstrips our ability to process any of it safely.

The food industry (and state, which claims to oversee the safety of
these products) is a truly nasty business. There is zero concern for
what effects they might have, only the need to make ever-increasing
profits. Which they achieve by using as few ingredients as possible,
of the cheapest quality, then making it palatable by adding vast
amounts of one or more of: refined sugar/ salt (both toxic to
humans)/ vinegar. They’ve even bought the term organic, to turn
into what they see fit, so now there’s no escape. Add in the vast
fortunes spent on marketing, the unconditional support of the medical
profession, you have to be pretty independently minded to escape that
kind of conditioning.

We did though, and that is why we are so busy now planting up an
edible forest, to try and replace what used to exist, so we can feed
our bodies properly. Sadly it won’t be soon enough, but it will be an
example for others to copy.

WOOD TREATMENT
This is something we’ve not solved, yet, to find an ecological and
cheap way to protect all the wooden parts of the house (roof beams/
windows/ and doors) from the effects of sun and humidity, having
vowed never to use paint or varnish again. So far we’ve made do
with teak oil. It’s cheap, the oil part is natural, but a solvent has
been added to dry it. I really hate this job, which has to be done in
the spring and autumn, so if you know of a 100% safe treatment (not
containing orange) please get in touch.

*
“La enfermedad es la gran maestra en nuestra vida. Ella es la semilla y la causa de cambio en la vida. Ella es el camino donde nos encontramos con el reino mineral, el reino vegetal y el reino animal. La enfermedad nos une con todo y con todos.”

On the wall at our homeopath’s office and roughly translated means:

“Illness is the greatest teacher in our lives. It is the seed and cause of change in life. It is the road to the kingdoms of minerals/vegetables/and animals. Illness unites us with all these things.”

One of the most profound things I’ve ever read, and rings so true with our search for healthiness. For it was through being ill that we found our focus, the path to how we live now, as part of Nature, not outside of it.

Which despite the current fads, a global obsession with healthiness that somehow has managed to completely take over everyone in deciding what and how to eat/ take as supplements/ spend on additional health insurance/ which complimentary treatments are essential. Creating a whole new health industry along the way, turning over trillions. Yet without the slightest improvement in our collective healthiness. The opposite in fact, most of us are a lot less healthy and are facing an earlier/ more painful death, children especially. Why? The answer is once again very simple, we’ve traded our own innate commonsense (knowing what it good for us) to enjoy the short-term pleasures of vested interest.

Don’t understand? Read on.

WHAT WE EAT
No food you buy should be ever be confused with being nutrition or healthy, ie what the body needs. It will sustain you in the short term, all the joins with grafting tape or paste (TEWAX), to prevent water getting in. None of ours took, but it was a hot/ dry spring + should have been done earlier, as soon as budding started + and using our own stock as the donor material.

CHAINSACS
In an ideal world such nasty/polluting/carcinogenic/ and potentially maiming tools wouldn’t be allowed. But until our garden has developed, this remains the only way I can think of to coppice firewood. To save others potential injury here are some tips we’ve picked up.
1) before doing anything, go on a proper training course (2–3 days). Your local Agricultural College should be able to tell you where. It’s not cheap, but like being taught to drive there is no other way to understand all the risks safely. The course also includes maintenance, itself worth the outlay – make sure you take plenty of notes and photos.
2) buy the heaviest/most powerful model you feel able to carry, as this governs the thickness you’ll be able to cut. Buy it from a local dealer, as you will need their help at the beginning, especially with chain sharpening and servicing. Which brand to choose is a problem, none seem to be worth what they cost. Here everyone favours STIHL. Years ago I had one of their strimmers and it was crap, their current range of chainsaws and brushcutters aren’t any better.
3) as well as the saw you will need suitable protection – boots/trousers (don’t get dungarees)/ jacket/ helmet (with metal visor – not plastic) with ear defenders/ gloves (wear latex ones inside to protect your skin from oil/petrol).
4) plus the appropriate file for sharpening the chain teeth + a 5 ltr metal can (plastic rots) for the fuel.
5) before starting ALWAYS check the following – that you’ve cleaned

WHERE AND HOW WE LIVE
I thought this bit was obvious, but as the majority continue to ignore what is good for them the message still needs to be hammered home.

NUMBERS
Sustainably, this planet can support around 3 million of our species. Yes, that’s not a mistake, MILLION. Any more and its ability to provide the basics (clean air/ water/ food/ fuel/ and all the other essential materials for life) begin to suffer, not just for us, but all the other species whose existence and co-dependence allow the ecology to function. Plain to anyone. Yet apparently not, the so-called advanced countries, like the UK, are so over-populated already that there is no public supply of clean water, no clean air, and no uncontaminated food (regardless of labelling). And when it does finally come to growing all their own food, by turning every square inch of spare land over to agriculture, at least 90% of their population will starve.

HAPPINESS/ MENTAL HEALTH
We are creatures of Nature, therefore the only place and way to live is part of that. Anything else simply destroys our equilibrium.

POLLUTION
What industry churns out, and the effects of its products during use then later in landfill, we believe is strictly controlled (for our safety) by legislation and a system of inspection/ certification. It isn’t, this is a myth. The only way that could happen would be if all industry ceased and we return to making everything for ourselves. Until this happens cancer and mortality rates will continue to rise.

COMPOSTING
To become truly sustainable we need to deal with all our waste on site, zero going to municipal landfill. So far we’ve got it down to about one carrier bag’s worth a week, as virtually everything brought in either has no packaging or can already be recycled here. Garden weeds and prunings are piled together, until we can find a way to shred them. All the kitchen surplus + ash from the wood stove + humanure goes straight on the compost heap. This has been a great success, providing usable material in just three months. It’s also simplicity itself. Just an area of soil, approx one metre wide by two deep. Located a short distance from the house but well screened. Around which has been built a dry stone wall, about a foot or so high, to stop the wind blowing stuff about. And that’s it. No concrete base, no cover, no divisions, nothing else added. Maintaining it is easy too. Everything gets thrown in at the front. When the pile reaches the top of the wall (about 3 months) I drag it back with the raedera to the middle, the next time to the far end, after which it’s ready.

COMFREY
This is one of the most essential plants in any garden, and you can never have too many. Nobody here sells the root cuttings so we asked our friends Sue & Chris of Devonshire Mill (http://devonshiremill.co.uk) to send us some of theirs. They all survived and since then we’ve been splitting them each March so eventually we’ll have hopefully around 500. There are already
avocado/ paw paw/ loquat/ apricot/ peach/ plum/ pomegranate/ custard apple/ papaya/ persimmon/ walnut/ almond/ over 40 different herbs for tea/ physalis/ bamboo/ barberry/ hornbeam/ Maureen's first plot was washed away early on, then it got far too hot hackberry/ cherry/ witch hazel/ linden/ service tree/ sumach/ tree, spanish tea, stevia, wild carrot, yarrow.  for plants to thrive during the summer.  Since then we've reconsidered the idea and started a new one, on the site of what we hoped would OUR TEA GARDEN garden (including potatoes, which can be grown here all-year-round).  Plants that survived (leaf crops/ garlic) have been transplanted and the rest re-sown.  All our compost from now on will be used here.  Finding all the varieties we need to make an edible forest has been our most frustrating task.  I have a wish list (downloadable) that already runs to over a thousand different types, as well as a smaller list of money), I had never used a watering system prior to living in Galicia.  In Portugal we devised something similar fed from a nearby spring.  Here it is essential, from May to November, every day.  The first summer we used our waste water and a watering can.  It took hours, and of course involved a lot of walking up and down between terraces.  Something better had to be organised.  Despite having our own borehole it costs money to pump it up and we also have no idea how much is down there.  Yet another puzzle to solve.  The first idea was to bury 5 ltr water bottles, one next to each tree.  There's no trouble getting hold of these.  Pierced at the bottom with a pin it drains slowly enough to keep the plant alive while encouraging the roots to look for a better source, and they only need to be refilled once or twice a week, but still hard work.  What we settled on eventually was a compromise.  Between saving water/ efficient use of time/ and cost.  It's called a dripper system, and works out at around 0.75 euros a plant, each gets 260 ml of water a day, and utilises gravity so no pump required.  Comprising: a main 40mm pipe, which runs from inside the top of the fenced-in area right down to the bottom (about 100 m).  Off which are spurs (in 16mm pipe) running horizontally along each terrace, where at approx 2 m intervals an even thinner pipe branches off, attached to a tiny stake to water each plant.  We run it just after sunset, for four minutes, giving them all night to take it up.

BEES

No garden is complete without at least one hive (two even better).  We had already successfully built and homed three colonies in Yorkshire, but knew little more about beekeeping than that.  Finally we're in an area with plenty of other apiarists, and they've been helping us through the various processes, so should be able to take all the honey we need eventually.  Currently there's just the one hive.

avocado/ paw paw/ loquat/ apricot/ peach/ plum/ pomegranate/ custard apple/ papaya/ persimmon/ walnut/ almond/ over 40 different herbs for tea/ physalis/ bamboo/ barberry/ hornbeam/ hackberry/ cherry/ witch hazel/ linden/ service tree/ sumach/ buckthorn/ alder/ and saskatoon.  NO garden is complete without at least one hive (two even better).  We had already successfully built and homed three colonies in Yorkshire, but knew little more about beekeeping than that.  Finally we're in an area with plenty of other apiarists, and they've been helping us through the various processes, so should be able to take all the honey we need eventually.  Currently there's just the one hive.

OUR TEA GARDEN

Directly around the house are beds devoted solely to the herbs used for making tea, from the fresh (not dried) leaves and flowers: agrimony, blackberry, catnip, chrysanthemum, cistus, cleavers, comfrey, echinacea, evening primrose, fennel, giant hyssop, grape, Hawthorn, heather, hemp agrimony, honeysuckle, hyssop, jasmine, lavender, lemon balm, lemon geranium, lemon grass, lemon verbena, liquorice, mallow, marigold, mexican tea, mint(s), nasturtium, olive, passion fruit, pennyroyal, perilla, portuguese green tea, raspberry, rosa rugosa, rosemary, rue, sage, self-heal, st john's wort, strawberry tree, spanish tea, stevia, wild carrot, yarrow.

THE VEGETABLE PLOT - MARK II

Maureen's first plot was washed away early on, then it got far too hot for plants to thrive during the summer.  Since then we've reconsidered the idea and started a new one, on the site of what we hoped would be a campsite and is already levelled.  This time as a winter veg, a week (full body) is more than enough.  Soap/ shampoo should never be used (both contain harmful chemicals, even organic).  Instead the juice of a lemon, diluted in a bowl of hot water, will be proving to be a natural treatment.  Back in the reservoir, this toxic soup then undergoes one more chemical load, when the water company aims to kill off bacteria and pathogens prior to pumping it to customers, yet another form of industrial waste, cleverly repackaged as benign.  After which it makes its way along a network of distribution pipes, all made from materials long known to leach toxic chemicals.  Am I alone in wondering why the government is allowed to continue poisoning its people like this?

CLEANLINESS IS NOT ALWAYS NEXT TO HEALTHINESS

Washing ourselves to excess is not a good thing.  Two or three times a week (full body) is more than enough.  Soap/ shampoo should never be used (both contain harmful chemicals, even organic).  Instead the juice of a lemon, diluted in a bowl of hot water, will be just as effective plus it has powerful herbal qualities.

Never use detergents (to wash clothes with), especially those with a scent.  Or empty the waste containing them down the drain afterwards.  An overnight soak in water is usually enough (nothing added), having first brushed off any obvious spots.  If absolutely necessary use the tiniest amount of pure soap.

If the air wasn't already polluted enough, the internal combustion engine adds yet another toxic load.  One of the biggest cover-ups in history.  If you live anywhere within 2 km of a road/petrol station/ airport/ or where fuel is pumped/ drive a car/ take a bus/ even cycle, you are exposing yourself to a lethal dose.

EMF (electro-magnetic frequency) RADIATION

Every single invention by our species has had an equally destructive effect.  The latest is EMF.  It affects the immune system, that incredible part of us all which keeps us healthy and repairs damage.  Originally detected when people living near newly installed pylons started getting inexplicably ill, now it's measurable around any source of electricity and especially where there is a signal for mobile phones/ radio/ tv/ radar.  The highest levels are near the transmitters (up to a kilometre away), after which comes all wireless appliances - especially phones/ computers/ and wi-fi (up to 30 metres away).  Just as dangerous though are the lowest rated, if you are continually exposed, like - the wiring in the home/ office and appliances which are on all the time.  The only safe place is to live/ work as far away as possible from any of them.

MOBILE PHONES

Proven to cause brain tumours, so why does anyone continue to use them?  And why are manufacturers allowed to sell ever more powerful versions?

NUCLEAR RADIATION

It takes only a one nuclear explosion/ accident to irradiate the entire planet for thousands of years, as it travels endlessly around the globe on the wind/ tides.  What more is there to say, there is NO argument whatsoever to continue using nuclear power/ weapons.
THE IMPORTANCE OF CLEAN PURE WATER

After clean air, pure water is the next most important/valuable element on the planet. More so than food. Without it we would all die within days. Yet most people still don’t realise why, that this provides us with a unique kind of nourishment unavailable from any source (read more in LIVING WATER, the work of Viktor Schauberger, by Olof Alexandersson 0-946551-57-X, and WATER & SALT, by Dr F Batmanghelidj 1-903571-24-3). Ideally we should only drink water from a mountain spring, but as this isn’t going to be possible for most people, at very least from any other kind of (unpolluted) spring or borehole. It won’t be as efficacious, but on the scale of how we live now, a vast improvement. Equally we should drink sufficient (more on that in a minute). And just in case you imagine bottled water will suffice, it doesn’t. Nor tap water. In fact you should never drink tap water. I wouldn’t even wash with it, especially when heated (as this creates a toxic vapour as well), or use swimming pools, which have an even higher chemical load. And don’t think a filter makes tap water safer, it doesn’t.

None of this should be a surprise. You only have to spend a moment to think about where water comes from to appreciate there are vast differences in quality. Pure mountain springs are as pollution-free as it is possible to be. It has also had this amazing journey. Percolating down through many different types of rock, leeching as it goes unique essential salts/minerals/and homeopathic qualities. At the same time a process of carbonation takes place, which literally gives it the lift to rise back up to the surface, and that imbues it with a life force. While at the other end of the spectrum we have tap water. Its journey is the complete opposite, of acquiring not good things but an increasingly toxic load. First by being stored in vast man-made reservoirs, where sunlight causes it to stagnate. Added to which is one of the ones we’d really like to sow right now (also downloadable), but here in Spain the forest garden movement has yet to evolve, so there are no seed suppliers. Getting them from the UK has been a different problem. Forest gardening there is so popular/mainstream now that there’s an awful lot of money to be made. With the result that the market for seeds has collapsed in favour of selling only plants (at a much higher profit). All those suppliers who valiantly kept going through the years of obscurity now deserting the cause and joining their ranks. So we’ve been stumped. There’s not a single seed supplier left on the entire planet (as far as we can discover) who deals specifically in these type of plants in small affordable quantities. Some are available from conventional seed merchants, but the quality is generally very poor. This year for example, from fifteen types of plant only two germinated, and one of those proved to be the wrong variety. And this was from one of the largest seed companies in the UK. Our only hope is that people reading this might have some of the plants in their garden and could send us some of their fresh seed.

CUTTINGS

Even easier, why not send us a cutting. We’ve already had many given by friends, and they all survived. Simply:
1) take an empty plastic drinks bottle (500 ml – 1 ltr). 3/4 of the way up cut round with a knife.
2) insert cutting in the larger part, along with some lightweight material to keep it damp.
3) replace top and re-seal with wide sellotape.
4) wrap in a couple layers of newspaper, securing with sellotape.
In return we will refund the full postage.

IRRIGATION

Apart from a disastrous flirt with leaky hose in Yorkshire (total waste far), and could become a really useful crop once properly pruned and we can work out a way to get the oil out of them on-site. In the meantime coppicing is already providing plenty of firewood.

We have also been planting vines, or to be more accurate cuttings, with the aim to eventually make our own wine. Spurred on by a very dear friend in Galicia, an organic grower, who sent us a parcel of them from his finca. Red for making wine with, and white for eating. This was in January 2011. Sadly I was ill-prepared and could only heel them in at first. They got planted out eventually but needed far more time to establish roots so most died. Last December (2011) we sought replacements. This time in nearby Portugal, from our neighbours when we lived in Odemira, who are also into wine making. Augusto (who also crafts the hand plough) is self-taught, having started at the tender age of 72 with just 40 plants, and now (aged 79) has 700 (all from cuttings), giving him an annual harvest of 700–1000 litres of the most palatable wine I’ve ever tasted. Returning with 30 fresh cuttings, which this time went in straight away. What I didn’t anticipate though was how dry that winter would be, and they didn’t thrive either. Untaught though, this year I have taken cuttings from our plants, early in November (as soon as the leaves started falling off), and hope this will give them the time they need to establish.

Despite the better climate it takes a lot longer to get stuff going here (compared to the UK). This is because we have such a long hot summer (June-Sept), when if things don’t die they certainly don’t put any effort into growing. Commercial growers get round this with shading and irrigating 24 hrs a day. Ours are having to find the water table first. They are managing to survive though, and that’s what matters. So far we have specimens of: orange/lemon/grapefruit/mandarin/olive/passion fruit/fig/grape/kiwi/guava/...
heat, work begun on the pond. This had been created by the previous owner, with a JCB, but he’d made the sides too steep and during the winter of 2010–11 rain caused the hillside above to collapse, filling it in. That has now been completely rebuilt, with terraces, planted up with trees that are fast-growing and have extensive root systems, and kept topped-up by waste water from the house.

As I write it’s winter (2012) and we’re still working away on that first acre. The terraces are now visible, if not totally levelled (! concentrated on where trees/shrubs were to be planted).Already we’ve got somewhere between 500–800 specimens in, most grown by us from seed.

THE PLANTS

Everywhere was bare and dusty when we moved in, which is what happens when it has been used solely for agriculture/ monoculture. In this case goats (who ate everything), then for rearing pigs (the local jamón – ham – industry). Since then more and more wild plants (trees/shrubs/perennials/and annuals) have begun to reappear. Not a very wide range yet, mainly olives/ a type of oak that bears the acorns used to fatten pigs/ spanish lavender/ cistus (several types including ladanifer)/ st john’s Wort/ wild blackberry/ the strawberry tree/myrtle/ rose/ wild pear/ wild grape/ a wide range of fungi/ heather/ plus others I’m calling weeds until we can get them identified. All of which are already useful and help towards replacing the all important shade we need to establish plus fertility, which will be essential when we start to plant up the remainder without an irrigation system to get them started.

The olives are particularly vigorous (I’ve counted at least 100 trees so

Making a wildwood is therefore about two things. That we change our lives, to shun and become independent of those who wield power (via the use of money). And work instead on replanting every square inch of soil available to us. It isn’t hard. Anyone whose combined household income right now is more than £5000 a year is already wasting far more than they actually need. And that overspending is down to a windowsill. The only requirement is to grasp and apply those two underlying principles. Spend less, and plant the greatest number of different permanent (and self-seeding annuals) edible plants as possible (read THE MAN WHO PLANTED TREES by Jean Giono). Still confused? Just think about a forest, divided into seven different layers. The first (LAYER 1) represents the tallest and widest trees. These go in at the extremities of your land, leaving enough room in-between for the next layer (2), the mid-sized trees and large shrubs. Between those go the ordinary-sized shrubs (3). Followed by perennials and self-seeding annuals (4). Then ground cover plants (5) and roots (6), with climbers (7) making the last layer. You can use my (downloadable) plant list to help you choose which plants, or get a copy of Ken Fern’s book PLANTS FOR A

convincing us that they alone know best. Even if under their care the general population has become less fit/ less sane/ contracted more illnesses and diseases/ and is now dying off in far greater numbers/ younger, than ever before.

Hardly surprising, when contrary to its title (the National Health Service) it doesn’t have anything to do with helping people to become healthier, only in treating illness. Which they do using the most odd and unhealthy combination of diagnosis and treatments invented yet, born not out of a deep repository of understanding/ experience/ and hands-on knowledge, but sold to them by the worst kind of conflict of interest possible. The pharmaceutical industry, one of the most powerful and ruthless global businesses on the planet. Whose sole interest is not greater healthiness (on the contrary), but to become the most profitable parasite yet, from us as the host.

They have no mandate to inform about what is safe & healthy. Or how and where is best to live. Nor enforce industry to make only healthy products. Neither does their interest cover dentistry or ophthalmic care, even though we all need our eyesight and teeth just as much as any other parts of our body. They are at liberty to use any method of screening and treatment they wish, even if they are all dangerous (toxic/ destroy our immune system/ and cause cancer – mammography being a classic example). Or that we are unique, each of us, need treating as such, and have this amazing facility (amongst others) to repair and renew ourselves, so that when we do need their help it is purely to aid that dedicated system to do its job. Instead they pretend it doesn’t exist and that they know better. Why is the medical profession so dangerously arrogant? Because it exists solely to serve itself. A private members club, where only those who possess precisely the right attitude/ background are admitted – with

symbols, and the bottom line is they don’t accept any responsibility/ liability. Mall-culture, yet another fly-by-night business opportunity/ franchise exploiting the fallibility and suffering of others.

True alternative healthcare, the kind where you can walk away from the conventional system completely, does exist though. But only when you are prepared to take back the full responsibility for staying as healthy as possible. By which I mean actively choosing a way of life (the place you live/ what you eat/ occupation) that will ensure it. Then seek the means to do the rest. A profound step and one which sounds too good to be true, but is as real as anything else. Changing your life completely and finding someone who can help rebalance your system. Who not only has sound training but a wealth of experience, and also lives this way, no longer wishing to worship at the altar of consumerism, sustained solely by helping others and from the harvest of their own land. It’s as real as the effort you are prepared to make. We’ve already found three places where it is entirely possible.

ACUPUNCTURE

Very briefly, because you can read all about this in far more depth elsewhere, we’ve had treatment from a real alternative practitioner who uses this and there is no doubt it works, even in situations where you’d be seriously worried that not going to a GP/ hospital would be a big mistake. It’s not painful. There are no toxic side-effects. Though, as with all alternative medicine, treatment takes a lot longer than you’d think, typically weeks or months, depending on how healthy you are already.

HOMEOPATHY

Our current practitioner trained as a homeopath. I can’t explain how it
the will to succeed, increase profitability, and protect/ promote corporate sanctity. We are merely the means they use to ensure that. Units to be passed through their ever more cost-effective, one-size-fits-all system as quickly as possible. Which is why they prescribe so many painkillers/ anti-depressants/ antibiotics/ anti-inflammatories. It's a hell of a lot cheaper than trying to do something that will really help improve a patient's health. And if they don't work there are plenty more equally bizarre and short-term cheap drug/ surgery-related therapies to try. The quote: the operation was a success but the patient died, should be enough of a warning.

THE ALTERNATIVES

At first glance there is a vast choice. If you have the money. Except most of them are no more than the same NHS-trained consultants offering exactly the same type of service, but giving the impression they are more efficient/ faster/ better, because you are paying. Their clients are therefore the more stupid among us, with more money than sense. Nonetheless the government would like far more of us to join them, so it can begin running down their side of the business. Expect an aggressive marketing campaign, as both state and industry stand to make even more of a fortune out of offering us less. Meanwhile millionaires will continue to die just as prematurely and pointlessly as everyone else.

The other new growth area is complementary medicine. The best description I can think of for these is it’s the equivalent of nail salons. Just as popular, priced to be affordable by the greatest number (so cheap enough to cover all the bases), gives an impression of offering all the answers, in a pain & stress-free environment, topped off with a hint of ancient eastern know-how for authenticity. Except none of the practitioners have any appropriate training, they only focus on what works, but THE COMPLETE HOMOEOPATHY HANDBOOK by Miranda Castro ISBN 0-333-555581-3 is a good starting point. The medication (remedies) is tablets, nothing else. They are really cheap and non-toxic. Works with adults/ children/ babies/ even animals (our cats in Yorkshire were treated by a homeopathic vet, an experience that was a million times better than any conventional practice). We have been with ours for about two years now (neither of us had a GP previously for 30 years), both been treated for chronic conditions, and are literally amazed at the results. Not only that, how much better/ stronger we feel. The best recommendation though is, unlike the voodoo school of conventional medicine, which seeks first to label the problem, and therefore prejudge treatment and the outcome, this is totally up to your body/ the practitioner/ and you.

HERBALISM

Of all the systems I thought we'd be tripping over in Spain (and Portugal), this has been the hardest to track down. We've not come across a single genuine practitioner using it yet. Still we remain interested in using herbs and learning the art, so have been growing plants to try out. Successfully enough to decide all our forest garden species will be herbs from now on. I can definitely recommend THE RHS NEW ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HERBS & THEIR USES by Deni Bown ISBN 0-7533-3386-7, THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MEDICINAL PLANTS by Andrew Chevalier ISBN 0-7533-0314-3, and the ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HERBAL MEDICINE by Thomas Bartram ISBN 13 978-1-85487-566-0, plus any titles by Juliette de Bairacli Levy. We started by using herbs for tea, instead of buying them, and now have over forty different types of plants to pick fresh from each day. If you are interested there is a downloadable plant-list (showing which herbs can be used for tea) on our site, on the visit our wildwood - forest garden page.

FUTURE (ISBN 1-85623-011-2). He's another luminary of mine, among the pantheon of inspirational horticultural radicals. Who not only instigated the PLANTS FOR A FUTURE project in Cornwall (sadly now dying from a lack of clear direction/ firm leadership without him), but produced the most comprehensive and easy to understand public access database on the subject, available online at http://www.pfaf.org for free searches, or even better as a download/ CD to use at home.

Our first summer here (2009) very little got done, too many other things to attend to, and we still found it far too hot. The winter wasn't much better, the scale of everything and realising it would all have to be done by hand froze us with indecision. Then one day we discovered the perimeter fencing had been broached and the wild boar were free to roam, along with the deer. They knocked down walls, churned up paths, and ate all our newly bought trees. Something had to be done. To re-fence completely was way too expensive, so we settled for doing a bit at a time, even if it did make the place like Colditz. It was also a false economy, as we realised too late, because the circumference of the whole area is of course only three times the sixth. But what we did get was a much needed respite from the beasts and the focus to discover what to do first. Chose an area directly around the house, not the best land but from experience we knew this would mean the least amount of walking back and forth. It was also the same size as our Yorkshire garden, so easy to imagine how the landscaping and planting should proceed. I started by marking out the terracing, Maureen making a temporary vegetable plot to tide us over until the forest matured. Our next jolt came in the summer, realising all the plants would need an irrigation system (described later). The following Spring (2011) our first hive of bees arrived (ditto). Summer again, and finally acclimatised to the used - certified conservation grade/ organic/ bio-dynamic/ agroforestry/ or any other rubbish label dreamed up by some marketing department to fool the gullible masses. First last and always this is just about money. Those who stole our land, took away our freedom, and continue to get richer and more powerful at our expense. Even if it dries up all the remaining natural fresh water/ poisons it with lethal chemicals/ and destroys what little else is left of our precious ecology.

Wildwoods are the antithesis to plantations, and those who seek to thrive from them. They are also our only hope. To kick-start a resurgence of replanting, rebuild the primeval tree-cover which until only 10,000 years ago covered the entire landmass of this planet and existed for millions of years before we came along. Containing not only an infinitesimal number of trees and other plants, most of which have never been identified/ seen/ or probably exist any longer, but an equal diversity of wildlife co-existing within it. A biodiversity, unique ecological system, this planet uses so every living thing can have enough clean air to breathe/ healthy food to sustain them/ and pure water to re-energise from. Until a mere second ago (in geological time) we were part of that, and knew our place in the great interdependence of all things. When concepts like poverty had yet to be invented. The need for any kind of infrastructure/ planning/ or other kind of organisation not even been considered. No-one supervised anyone or anything. There was no land division or ownership. No homes/ possessions/ tools/ language/ gods/ money. And no-one even spent a single second in the labour for anything. That is until we started to impose our pinhead logic on everything. Which we'll no doubt continue until what little remains of that which keeps us alive has been completely destroyed. Unless we wake up and choose to fight them instead.
The climate here is Mediterranean, unsurprisingly, though it’s a rather meaningless term as even the local town has completely different weather conditions/ potential for growing. I like to think of it like Cornwall (Newlyn in particular), but rather more extreme. Winter is the best time for working in the garden, spring the most beautiful, summer awful (far too hot).

Our design for the land is a WILDWOOD or FOREST GARDEN. We want it to become a place full of large permanent trees, understoreyed by shrubs/ perennials/ wild annuals, in a way that is intuitive (as we are instructed by the spirits here, and when we can find the right plants/ seeds), that creates a diversity and self-sustaining ecology of its own. With the idea of harvesting all our food/ fuel/ medicine/ whatever else has a practical use we currently have to earn money to pay for. And doing it sustainably, taking only the surplus bounty, not in anyway damaging the system or destroying any of the other species we hope will want to make their home their too.

Understanding what we mean by forest is essential. This has nothing to do with its current usage, which has been bastardised by those who seek only to make money. Those are plantations.

Recognisable by having nothing in common with nature, containing no other living things, and only there because the farming industry discovered how easy it was to make money from growing trees instead of other cash crops. Even the species they use are as far away from being natural as it is possible to imagine, bred specifically to crop in the shortest possible time. Destined to become the raw material for superfluous businesses like IKEA/ packaging/ and now fuel (for power stations and pellet stoves). Made all the more credible by being labelled as a renewable resource, which couldn’t be further from the truth, regardless of the cultivation method.

Crofters used it to clean the raw wool prior to spinning/ weaving. Soap was made from it. And the Romans even bathed in pee, something we did also for many years, as it is as effective as soap while takes nothing positive out, in fact moisturises and stimulates the skin/ blood circulation (an excellent first aid remedy for frostbite or chills). The only reason we stopped was a slight lingering odour, which later we discovered could be avoided by simply rinsing with hot water. In a washing machine however it is superb, replacing the need for any detergent/ conditioner. At the very least everyone should be saving theirs to fertilise the soil, either by peeing outside, or better still (avoiding any build-up of smell) in a bucket which is then added to the grey water or compost heap.

A GOOD NIGHT’S SLEEP

Paramount, for restoring both the body and mind. To this end we've been trying out all sorts of ideas:

- our bed has been deliberately constructed from solely wood, no chemical treatment, no metal that could charge with electricity.
- whenever in houses with AC mains electricity we switch it off (from the fuse box) at night.
- toe therapy is good, especially for insomnia. Easy too, and only takes about fifteen minutes per person. Squeezing the appropriate acupressure points. Instructions can be found at: http://www.reflexologyworld.com/brazilian_toe.htm.

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it mainly, but also applying to an infected area. Sounds truly nasty (dangerous even), but is perfectly safe and with time even becomes totally normal, honest. The benefits being: **homeopathic** - helps kick-start a lethargic self-repair system into action, **recycling** - all the precious nutrients our body discards, because we don't eat properly, **a complete medicine** - both for self-treatment (first aid/ minor ailments), or in the hands of an experienced practitioner to cure anything (even on animals), **and as an indicator of healthiness** - from the colour/ smell/ and taste, which can tell you how well your system is functioning. Have a go yourself. Next time you pee, catch some in a glass, ideally mid-stream, then hold it up to the light. A healthy person's should be transparent/ crystal clear/ and odourless. If not, drink two glasses of water and next time you pee check again, repeating this until there is a change. If after 24 hours there hasn't been any improvement, start discounting the possibilities by changing your diet. Cut out things like - meat/ coffee (one espresso a day)/ all milk products/ anything with white flour in it/ alcohol (no more than a glass every now and then)/ smoking/ anything with sugar added (honey is fine), or salt (use for de sal instead). If after all that there is still no improvement then see a practitioner as soon as possible. Earlier I mentioned how important drinking pure spring water was. Getting the quantity right is equally as important. Rather than say 6-8 glasses a day (this is on top of drinks), get into the habit of checking your pee and when it is not clear have a glass then. Also, start the day with two glasses. In the past urine was far more highly respected. Revered even. Sheet for the bed, attached to a cable which led to an earthing rod buried outside. They were very expensive though, so Maureen knitted our own version out of very fine copper wire. Sadly it was a case of the princess and the pea, far too uncomfortable. What did work though was even more bizarre. Standing barefoot in the garden. A friend suggested this for eczema. I'd had some for many years and given up on ever finding a cure. The first time I sat for an hour, luckily it's warm enough here to do that (our friend lives in Scotland and tried it in the snow). Didn't feel a thing (obviously), except afterwards the eczema was alarmingly inflamed. Two further sessions cleared it completely. Also good for severe mood-swing.

**STRESS**

Alternative medicine believes that stress is the root of most ill health. And when you think about how our body's own repair system works, this makes perfect sense. Diverting a finite resource to deal with stress is going to have a negative effect. I didn't appreciate any of this until I pushed my own body beyond its ability to cope. It happened in 2004. Up until then I'd always been the kind of person that operates only in two states, either hyper or comatose (I literally fall asleep when my energy level drops below a certain level), aspergic (?). We were living in Portugal then, our fourth year on the road. Maureen had been mysteriously ill for several months and despite having been to what we were assured was a bona-fide alternative practitioner (who suddenly fled the country), wasn't getting any better. The portuguese health service was so bad you simply didn't go near them, so we were just hoping it would cure itself. I'd been working on yet another of our temporary gardens, and spent an entire week clearing head-high brambles on one of the slopes with a sickle. I woke suddenly in the middle of the night with a sharp browser. Willing to spend the time to discuss proposed projects/ purchases to see if there is a better solution, prefer to repair anything rather than sell new, and are more than happy to sell just a handful of nails/ a single nut/ bolt/ screw/ washer. Offering real a service and at the same time underpinning the commonsense values of true community. **OUR OWN GARDEN AT LONG LAST, IN EL POCITO**

2.5 hectares (6 acres approx) of steep hillside, shaped like an amphitheatre, the kind of geography where rivers are born (hence the name EL POCITO, which means little well). Surrounded by pine plantations (protecting us from the north wind), a few other fincas, and only us actually living here, so no neighbours for miles. But what makes it even more perfect is the amazing sense of place you notice immediately on entering. The trees part and suddenly there's all this sky, under which is the view we never tire of. 180° of cliff-top that stretches to the border with Portugal.

The topsoil is a form of sand, which is really easy to work while wet but turns to concrete as soon as it dries out. Under that is a mix of a crumbly rock/ granite/ and clay. There are also thousands, or millions, of rocks. From pebble-sized up to boulders. Strewn all over, often mysteriously appearing overnight. Treacherous to walk on at the moment, but hopefully we can find the money soon to fence in the entire site then use this wonderful resource to build new walls and other stone projects including a house for short and long-stay visitors. The latter always welcome as there is never a shortage of things that need doing - terracing/ tree planting/ brush-cutting/ and digging canals (to control flash-flooding).

[http://www.ecoprac.com](http://www.ecoprac.com). Fashioned originally from old bicycles – the front wheel and forks removed/ handlebars turned right round/ crank & pedals taken off/ then a bracket welded to the bottom of the frame, to take those Wolf-type of interchangeable garden implements, or ones from a small hobby tractor. And that’s it. Grab the handlebars, back wheel leading, and push/ pull. Makes short work of hoeing between rows or digging the perfect irrigation canal/ planting trench. Tools were the first thing that attracted us to Portugal, or to be totally honest the ironmonger shops (oddly called drogarias), which we discovered first on an exploratory trip visit to Galicia. We had gone to see if the small town of Ponte da Barca, only 5 km away, would serve better than the 120 km round-trip we and everyone else was making to the nearest spanish town (Orense). I can't imagine why we didn't thought of it before, apart from thinking the portuguese were really scary. The only ones we'd met (mainly at our local bar and fiestas) literally were like Mexican bandits. All really small, plump, sporting huge bushy black Zapata moustaches, and dressed in very ill-fitting suits circa demob. The only things missing were belts of bullets and a sombrero. They also liked to drink, starting early in the morning and not stopping. Actually northern Portugal could stand-in for Mexico, especially in the summer. That's when every living thing shrivels up and turns to dust. The buildings and roads have been crumbling away for centuries, the transport too, there are no large shops, and the people are noticeably a lot poorer. Yet despite this, Portugal is a lot friendlier and more interesting (still is). The first difference being the bars, which not only serve a much better espresso (at half the price), but cakes as well. We hadn't found (and still haven't) a single decent example of pastries in Spain. Even more amazing was the produce market in the old town square, with far
Mosquito bites are more painful, there are far more of them too, and isn’t fatal, but I wouldn’t want to find out, and just in case we’ve got At the other end of the spectrum are the wild boar and deer. Both should be removed quickly as the bite can leave a nasty scar. An experiment with our new lemon trees might offer some hope. Using a small plant sprayer and fresh pee, dosing them often, got rid of one infestation in no time and the tree was left unharmed. Prior to living in Spain I had very strong anti-hunting principles, not any more. We are still vegetarians but extend a warm welcome to anyone wishing to take as many as they want.

The most bizarre tool has to be the hand plough, which we reckon must have originated in France as the only ones we’ve seen are homemade and belong to neighbours who worked there, though there is a Spanish company now who produce a very expensive version. The hand plough must have originated in France as the only ones we’ve seen are homemade and belong to neighbours who worked there, though there is a Spanish company now who produce a very expensive version.

The smallest creatures can be just as destructive. Greenfly for instance, not strictly their fault as it’s the ant which creates the conditions for them to thrive, but once installed the plant is doomed. An experiment with our new lemon trees might offer some hope. Using a small plant sprayer and fresh pee, dosing them often, got rid of one infestation in no time and the tree was left unharmed. Irritating (to the gardener) but not strictly pests are horse flies and mosquitoes. I don’t remember if we had them in Galicia, probably not, but since then yes. The fly attaches itself like velcro and is totally resistant to slaps/ swatting/ or even being trodden on, but should be removed quickly as the bite can leave a nasty scar. Mosquito bites are more painful, there are far more of them too, and despite all the products there is no deterrent, although over time you can build up an immunity (as with bees). Living here has brought some respite (compared to town, we still sleep under a net though), and I guess it is because it’s so windy. Scorpions are a different instance, not strictly their fault as it’s the ant which creates the conditions for them to thrive, but once installed the plant is doomed. An experiment with our new lemon trees might offer some hope. Using a small plant sprayer and fresh pee, dosing them often, got rid of one infestation in no time and the tree was left unharmed. Irritating (to the gardener) but not strictly pests are horse flies and mosquitoes. I don’t remember if we had them in Galicia, probably not, but since then yes. The fly attaches itself like velcro and is totally resistant to slaps/ swatting/ or even being trodden on, but should be removed quickly as the bite can leave a nasty scar. Mosquito bites are more painful, there are far more of them too, and despite all the products there is no deterrent, although over time you can build up an immunity (as with bees). Living here has brought some respite (compared to town, we still sleep under a net though), and I guess it is because it’s so windy. Scorpions are a different matter, they fear nothing. The first one scared the life out of me, especially so far from medical help. Consensus locally is the sting isn’t fatal, but I wouldn’t want to find out, and just in case we’ve got stabbing pain in my stomach, where my appendix should be, it was excruciating. But nothing to the fear I’d pass out and someone would call an ambulance. I dragged myself out to the tap and poured freezing water all over myself until eventually numbness eased the pain. Next morning heading straight out to see a friend who was training to become an alternative practitioner, the nearest I had to trustable advice then. And this is where it starts to get spooky (or not, everything we do seems to be one coincidence after another), because he’d been expecting me. A quick examination confirming his suspicions. Not appendicitis, but my spine. What should have been hundreds of fine muscles allowing the discs to flex, was now a single rope, they had fused together. The pain was from nerve endings, which apparently travel a long way, even down the leg (sciatica). Cause? Stress. Getting wound up. It had found a weak-spot (where I’d had an accident as a child) and focussed all that angst there, so whenever I encountered an unfamiliar situation or new problem/ task to solve, my fear would be converted into an unconscious clenching of the muscles in my lower back. To make matters worse, not long after this Maureen suddenly collapsed and had to be rushed to the horror they call hospitals there, and given an emergency blood transfusion followed by surgery. The not knowing whether she was going to survive or not (the medics won’t tell anyone but the patient anything), driving back and forth to hospital each day (a 300 km round trip), caused so much pressure that eventually my back gave in completely and I was unable to walk/ sit/ drive/ carry/ or do anything. Nor was there any treatment available to help. Literally that was the worst winter of our lives. We could do nothing but stay in bed (the only warm comfortable place) for weeks on end. Until a friend, who’d had a similar back problem, sent a book entitled THE ART OF BACKSTRETCHING by Neil Summers (ISBN 0-9538123-0-8). That was the beginning of my recovery, by learning...
how to heal myself. It's a book of photographs, floor-based stretching exercises, arranged so there's a different set for each day of the week. All very easy and take just ten minutes in the morning, the same again in the evening. To begin with I just followed the instructions. Then later, when I'd got to know them all, it became apparent that some I didn't feel comfortable with and others needed more time to be effective, so I've gradually been refining them, plus adding exercises from a yoga book. The difference has been profound. I not only feel a lot more flexible, but stand upright properly for the first time ever. What's more, when I do the exercises it immediately puts me in a different state of mind. I feel calm, as if transported to another more spiritual meditative place. Not in a buddhist way, but a real connection to the nature spirits all around us. So it's been a great discovery. However I was still getting the painkillers from the homeopath. I've seen loads since then, several in the house and one under our bed, luckily they are very slow and easy to catch. Snakes live here too, some really big. But the worst without any doubt has to be the tick. Yes, size isn't everything, and these are truly nasty critters. One summer in Portugal they bred so prolifically the walls of the houses turned black. Our neighbour and her granddaughter were bitten, didn't notice and ended up in hospital. Normally its dogs that get their attention most, cats possess the sense to bite them off, then us. As a precaution I always check after working in the garden. Detected and removed early enough (within 24 hrs) there aren't any ill effects, you just have to make sure none of the mouth parts are still attached. This you do by suffocating them, with a prolonged squeeze on the head while pulling very gently, until you feel them loosening their grip. Always check afterwards with a magnifying-glass.

TOOLS

One of the real delights of having a garden in another country is how differently they do things. Tools especially. Number one surprise being the satcho (left in the picture) which is used instead of our spade/ fork/ hoe. It's an all-in-one. Like a mattock and swung like a pick-axe. Not easy, as they are deceptively heavy (well made), but the blades do come in a range of sizes/ weights, so you can start with the smallest and work up. I have several now, including one with an axe length handle (second left), which with the pickaxe are my most used tools, preferring as I do to work kneeling. Saves bending and the long handles are too short for me. Another favourite is the raeder (third from left), which is a real classic. Looks like a hoe but has a much wider/ deeper blade, and is hefty. Perfect for scraping and lifting jobs, once you have developed the muscles!

stopped watching television. Someone told us about this loophole in the tv licensing act which allows you to have a set but not pay the licence fee if it is used solely for playing videos/ DVDs. Not long after that I was reading THE GUARDIAN (and INDEPENDENT) and found myself getting increasingly annoyed at their tone. Followed by Radio 4, then Radio 3. It was like there was this conspiracy to keep the really bad news out of the media, and only feature stuff that was lightweight/ staid/ and commercial. The knock-on effect of not getting our daily dose of these was we both started to become inspired with new ideas and views of our own. Based not on the accepted sources, but purely from our own experiences and the work of others who were to all intents totally obscure and ignored. It made us realise that perceived knowledge/ wisdom – that body of information we all accept as true without needing personal validation – that shapes our behaviour and lives, is nothing of the sort. Just another creed peddled to get us to comply to the will of others. As the saying goes: believe nothing you hear, and only half of what you hear. Do this and I guarantee you'll feel far a lot more positive/ less fearful, and able to work out what it is you really want to do with the rest of your life, with the zest/ energy to make that happen.

were all gathering at one end, when suddenly she appears at the other. Made all the more impressive because up 'til then nobody had heard me speak in spanish (no excuse, I'm a man, we're rubbish at learning stuff like that). I have no idea what got into me, all I knew after that, this woman had finally been publicly shamed for all her sins. I spoke in tongues, I was eloquent, I damned her for all eternity, and from then on we all got our water.

Not surprisingly we also added one extra caveat to our criteria of search for land, never again to be dependent on anyone else for water.

PESTS

Gardening, wherever you are in the world, is always going to be a war with all the other vested interests, particularly if the land has been abused and the natural order disturbed. In Spain, where it is a lot hotter than the UK (at least in the summer), compounded by the wider range/ size and numbers of the potential enemy. Not quite as in plagues of locusts yet, but sufficient to keep you awake at night wondering how to deal with the damage they do cause. Colorado beetles were our first taste of the horrors awaiting us. I remember these from WANTED posters outside police stations as a child, wondering why then an insect no-one had ever seen could be considered dangerous. Now I know. Though it's not the adult that does the damage, they’re so brightly coloured and slow it's real easy to pick them off by the bucket-load (after which, incidentally, they can be used to make a really good dye). No, the real problem is their offspring. Just like with the cabbage white butterfly, you don't see them until it is far too late.
we had spent months nurturing and preparing. This only happened to us though. Our neighbours, old hands, had dug their plots with really deep canals. The plants were so well established their roots would hold them fast whatever. They did it like that to retain as much of the water as possible, paddy-field style, because they knew it would be at least another fortnight before their turn came again. We, having learnt our lesson, then set about rebuilding and replanting ready. Two weeks later something equally disturbing happened. This time I blame religion, particularly the catholic church. For promulgating the idea that anyone can get away with murder as long as they apologise afterwards. Because even though this was a small isolated community, one that depended totally on everyone pulling together, there was still one holier-than-thou who felt the rules didn’t apply to them. Who despite having watched us lose everything, was arrogant enough to decide the next time it was our turn for water they would have it. Who in the dead of night changed our dams and took every drop before I’d even set out. Even though a clear damp trail led directly to her plots. So who was this sinner? No less than the president of the water users association herself, who she who organised the rota of who got what and when. She who had more land than anyone else, sold more at market, and was married to the (indispensable) local Mr Fix-it (plumber/ electrician/ builder), making them the wealthiest and most influential family in town. Next best thing to mafia. Except what she hadn’t reckoned with was a strong viking bloodline and innate sense of fair play that is a Rooksby. Leading to an incident which has probably become local legend by now, along with the time our next-door neighbour (the one and only policeman) got so drunk he shot up a local bar. It happened when virtually everyone were just leaving their fincas after the early morning shift, pouring into the one and only narrow stretch of mountain path that leads to the various aldeas. Straight out of HIGH NOON. There we had spent months nurturing and preparing. This only happened to us though. Our neighbours, old hands, had dug their plots with really deep canals. The plants were so well established their roots would hold them fast whatever. They did it like that to retain as much of the water as possible, paddy-field style, because they knew it would be at least another fortnight before their turn came again. We, having learnt our lesson, then set about rebuilding and replanting ready. Two weeks later something equally disturbing happened. This time I blame religion, particularly the catholic church. For promulgating the idea that anyone can get away with murder as long as they apologise afterwards. Because even though this was a small isolated community, one that depended totally on everyone pulling together, there was still one holier-than-thou who felt the rules didn’t apply to them. Who despite having watched us lose everything, was arrogant enough to decide the next time it was our turn for water they would have it. Who in the dead of night changed our dams and took every drop before I’d even set out. Even though a clear damp trail led directly to her plots. So who was this sinner? No less than the president of the water users association herself, who she who organised the rota of who got what and when. She who had more land than anyone else, sold more at market, and was married to the (indispensable) local Mr Fix-it (plumber/ electrician/ builder), making them the wealthiest and most influential family in town. Next best thing to mafia. Except what she hadn’t reckoned with was a strong viking bloodline and innate sense of fair play that is a Rooksby. Leading to an incident which has probably become local legend by now, along with the time our next-door neighbour (the one and only policeman) got so drunk he shot up a local bar. It happened when virtually everyone were just leaving their fincas after the early morning shift, pouring into the one and only narrow stretch of mountain path that leads to the various aldeas. Straight out of HIGH NOON. There we
Twenty-five years later, having mastered growing our own food, we finally got the chance to have a go at generating electricity, when we decided to live in a van.

A defining moment, not only because we'd decided to become nomads, live outside the system, but we were attempting to do it in a van, something we had absolutely no experience of, likewise abroad, and reliant on alternative energy (ditto). It was 2000, the internet and Amazon didn't exist yet, we were about to learn how the hard way.

CONVERTING A VAN

The decision to live like this was not tribal, it was the only way we could think of to search for land while retaining the freedom to keep going for as long and to wherever it took - consuming the least amount of our precious capital. A major problem though was how to generate electricity during this period (which we imagined would be around three months spent searching, then another year or two while we built the house). For a short holiday this wouldn't be an issue, but we'd be needing enough to power lights/ radio/ CD player/ laptop/ printer/ and the all-important coffee grinder. Camper vans (the ones that come already converted) have a secondary 12 volt battery for this, with a device (called an inverter) to run conventional appliances. This is charged either by the van's alternator (not very efficient), or from a hook-up to the mains at a campsites. New Age van dwellers favouring the small petrol generator, which is good, especially to run power-hungry tools, but not something we'd be happy to live in close proximity too, even for a few minutes. Which left us with only one choice, alternative energy.

At this point we'd moved from our house and were renting a flat for house with. With the pressure to get it sorted really turned up now, the only other idea I could think of was classified ads section of the so-called radical/ alternative magazines. Among what seem to be eternal offers for reiki/ re-birthing/ permaculture courses/ and health supplements. Where indeed there was a company offering exactly what we needed - who would work out which system, supply all the parts, and provide a drawing so I could install it all. And at a price we could afford.

MISTAKE NUMBER TWO

Having sorted that out I then got back full-time to the conversion, so absorbing was it that not until several weeks later did I even think about the power issue again, assuming it was all in hand. Not so. Our contact, whose company turned out to be one man in his back bedroom, hadn't even begun. And now there was no time left to find anyone else (if such a person existed). So we decided on a programme of damage limitation, with daily phone calls/ faxes, to get him moving. Except unbeknown to us the only bits we'd end up procuring were those big enough to be sent direct from the manufacturers. That didn't dawn on us until a fortnight before we were due to set sail for Spain. Leaving a whole list of things we still needed, most of which I had no idea what they were or where to get them. Subsequently the installation was delayed right up 'til the last minute. To be exact, it was a Saturday, the week before Christmas. In the kind of weather you'd expect for North Yorkshire at that time of year, freezing, especially at 7am, when we started in the driveway of my friend Mick Bean's house. Twelve hours later it was done. We switched on, checked all the right lights came on, and called it a day. The next morning was spent packing, followed in the afternoon by a party for all our friends. Then at dawn on Monday we set off. Into freezing fog and with an ominous leak in the hydraulic breaking results were spectacular. By the time they were transplanted, what should have been a spaghetti of light-starved leggy specimens were bright and healthy, completely hardened-off, and eager to get going. So much so that within only a few weeks they already looked ready to crop. I hadn't even started sowing yet, and my method was far more time-consuming and costly. But at least when I did get going, irrigated by a seemingly endless spring, they didn't take long to catch up.

Then the water dried up. And I finally worked out their secret, Hydroponics, or as near as. First with the springs, then when that ran out switching over to an irrigation system the likes of which I'd never seen before. A massive water tank - the one in our pueblo was the size of a municipal swimming pool and been hand carved from a single boulder, fed by a stream high up in the mountain that ran all year, delivered water to all the fincas via a network of ancient stone channels (canals), all by gravity alone, the furthest being 3 km away. It looked timeless, and probably was. All built by hand, and so well designed no further maintenance was required other than a good limpeza (cleaning out) at the beginning of each season. To use simplicity itself. You walked the route the water had to take, and at each junction with another canal used a handful of soil to dam it in your favour. This was performed in the evening, when the sun had cooled, and took around an hour. The tank filled up overnight, so just before dawn you'd set off again to open the sluice. I had no idea what would happen next. From what came out it seemed the water would get there before me. But it didn't, and the longer I waited the less I imagined would finally arrive. Indeed, as it rounded the final corner there really was very little to see, except it had now become possessed with a momentum like no other. Sweeping straight through, taking with it all our plants/ seeds, even topsoil, everything though never in a single plot. The fincas, as they are called, are piecemeal, some as small as 2 m², most allotment sized, and often spread as far as the next village. We were allowed to use some of these, which had been left to run wild by owners who no longer lived there, totalling about an acre. Our first challenge being to clear them, then decide what and when to plant. We had arrived in the middle of winter, and despite being a lot further south than North Yorkshire discovered it was just as cold, a lot wetter, and for most days inside the clouds. Then just as we got acclimatised to that, everything changed. The sky became a blue so bright it wasn't real, and the temperature soared. This was the beginning of March, and overnight our world literally turned luminous green from all the fresh growth, wild herbs/ grasses/ shrubs and trees. It continued getting hotter until eventually I thought we must have missed Spring and gone straight into summer. But no. Without warning the cold would then suddenly return, freeze everything, then a few days later heat up again. Schizophrenic. Alternating like this right up 'til the first week of June (or as they say here, fortieth of May first day of summer). When until the end of September it would not drop below 30 C (day or night), peaking in the mid 40s.

Despite this we did very well in our spanish garden, especially with perennials/ shrubs/ and trees, most of which had been out sent by friends as seeds or cuttings, in preparation for when we got our own garden. They also really impressed the neighbours who hadn't seen most of them. However, when it came to growing annual veg, nothing seemed to work. To be honest, despite having had a garden for twenty-one years I never liked growing them, and this damned confusing climate wasn't helping. To fail at something so basic was particularly disconcerting as all our neighbour's plots were rapidly becoming veritable cornucopias. In no time every morning they'd be
distance from the top of an inspection hole down to the maximum liquid level, and threaded a piece of stiff wire at this point, so it rests on that. Using this and a torch, I can fill (with distilled water) until it touches.

A word of warning, you are working with acid, so always wear appropriate gloves and old clothes. If you do get splashed use baking soda to neutralise.

And that’s about it. If you have any questions or advice please do not hesitate to get in touch, we should aim to help each other.

MISTAKE NUMBER THREE

Halfway across Northern Spain the power ran out and a diagnostic indicator showed the battery was not charging or worse. Working out what and why was pointless, it could have been anything, so we bought candles instead. Putting it right took a further eighteen months, during which it became an obsession, so much so that all our other problems – being confined indefinitely in such a small space (our original destination Santiago de Compostela having turned out to be a ghastly nightmare) - not having a phone or postal address or any way of being contacted/ alone in a strange country with an equally baffling culture and language we couldn’t even order a coffee in/ and all the while supposed to be searching for a piece of land which we now hadn’t the slightest idea where it might be – were nothing in comparison. Auto-electricians had a look, we sent e-mails and letters to everyone we could think of (including the seller & manufacturer), even complete strangers. No-one could come up the right answer. Then our van’s engine blew up, and the only person we could find to do the repair took one look at the strange electrical system and the whole sorry tale came tumbling out. He was one of the many guardian angels we’ve encountered since. Not only for getting us mobile again, for next-to-nothing, but solving the mystery. It was the battery. We’d been persuaded to buy this specifically designed (and more expensive) one, specifically for alternative energy, except it had been delivered without the all-important installation instructions. The most critical of which was it should NOT be connected (or used) until fully-charged. As a result it was damaged beyond repair. However there was a warranty, which arrived (with the installation instructions) several weeks after we’d left (at the place we were renting), so all was not lost. Until we tried to contact both the auto-electrician and the manufacturer, even complete strangers. No-one could come up with a clue what I was talking about, DC electricity to him (and everyone else) might as well be from another planet (those who use it often are). There are just too many variables to get to grips with. Which is why you’ll probably never see an installation that actually works properly.

Up ‘til this point we’d not met any other van dwellers/ nomads/ or even conventional campervanners. But in the Alentejo (southern Portugal) it is like owning a classic motorbike or car – headlights flash, waves are exchanged, until we lost count. Not one had the same power system as us. Lots with solar panels or a petrol generator. We were the only one with a wind turbine. And why was this? Because at the time it sounded like the best idea, far more efficient than solar panels, cheaper and a lot healthier than a petrol generator, works day and night. But most importantly exactly right for where we were headed, Cape Finisterre, the wettest and wildest part of Spain. Plus the man who was advising us claimed he powered his entire house with one (an AIR 403/ X).

Wind turbines. We saw our first one at CAT, then much later they’d become so popular you could buy them any DIY store. And the smallest models (100-400 watts) are now so efficient you only have to breathe on the blades and they start spinning. 100-400 watts might not sound like a lot but the price tag is enough to convince you. What we didn’t realise though is spinning blades do not necessarily equal power. To get even a single watt out of an AIR 403/ X requires a lot of wind. At least 25-30 km/ hr, 3-4 hrs a day, every day, just to generate enough power to say watch a dvd. This wind system.
supplier and the manufacturer. Neither would reply. It took three months and the threat of legal proceedings (thanks to a very helpful trading standards officer) to do that. Then only to receive a terse e-mail from the manufacturer, referring to the very small print of the guarantee, the bit stating that any claim has to be first inspected by them, so would we kindly return the battery (at our expense), and by the way it only applies to products used solely in the UK. Neat. A lesson for us all, expect nothing and you won’t be disappointed.

By then we’d had more than our fill of looking for something that patently didn’t exist in Galicia, while trying to remain sane, so boldly decided to ditch Spain and try Portugal instead. For which we would need a new battery. Solved once more by our wonderful mechanic, who assured us an ordinary car/ van type would be just as good, as well as a lot cheaper. A very special moment. Knowing that finally, with no previous experience Mick & I had put all this together and it really did work. Retribution enough. As we headed off on yet another adventure, this time accompanied by three feline companions as a reminder of our eighteen months of exile in Galicia.

MISTAKE NUMBER FOUR
What happened next proves that things can get a lot worse before better. All the time we were driving it was fine, the van’s alternator kept us supplied with power and the evenings were still light until late. But once we’d settled on a specific region to search, and parked up, in no time the battery was dead again. No mystery this time, we’d made a monumental error of judgement.

Despite the hype, alternative energy is and always will be a very bewildering world. Even those who claim to know what a watt and amp are (whom I have yet to meet) find it totally baffling. I remember has also got to be clean, free of turbulence, which means high enough above any obstacles (trees and buildings), at least twice anything within a radius of 500 ft. So a two metre pole on the back of our van wasn’t going to come anywhere near close. It needs a proper tower. Here’s a couple of examples to show you what I mean. Where we live now is good. It’s 600 metres above sea-level. The land slopes steeply (almost vertically). On the highest part there is a water tank (3 m high) and from the top of that you are already 11 m above any other obstacle. The prevailing wind travels 60 km without meeting a single tree/ building/ or hill at this altitude. Perfect. Yet we’d still need a 10 m tower. The other example is from when we were driving along a ridge on a mountain in Galicia, this time at over 3000 ft, when a storm engulfed us (see the photo at the beginning of this chapter). It was so wild we were forced off the road to wait it out, even the doors wouldn’t open. That was the one and only time we’d thought they’d break up, the noise was deafening. At one point the liquid levels. It can be really difficult, so what I’ve done is cut a short time (in hours), noting the voltage at the end. The only

work out]. Somewhere on the mount will be a shadow when it is in the correct position, use this. It should also be possible to alter the tilt, though I haven’t managed to work out how yet.

DAILY PROCEDURE

Before using any appliances ALWAYS fully charge the battery first. Make this a daily mantra.

Charging the battery. The sun rises and sets in a different place every day of the year. It also varies in angle of ascent/ descent and speed – both higher and faster in the summer. How often you need to check the alignment then is something you have to develop a feel for, usually between 30–60 minutes. Make a habit of checking the display panel too, it not only tells you what is happening but teaches us as well. During the charging phase you are waiting for the voltage to reach 14.8. That’s the highest it is ever going to go, then drops back to 14.2. ONLY then and if still sunny can you use appliances (up to a maximum of 100 watts for 150–170 watts of panel or 50 watts for 100 watts of panel). If at any time the voltage drops below 14.0 switch off the load/ check the alignment.

Using the battery at night for the first time. Check the voltage first. This is to discover what the true 100% figure is, which will only become apparent two hours after power has stopped coming in. For some reason it’s not marked on the battery and all makes differ. Once you know that, then comes the hard bit, working out what the 90% voltage is. The simplest method is to choose a 12 volt appliance (not 240 v, as the inverter consumes power too) and run it for 10% of your battery Ah capacity x 12, divided by the wattage, which will give you the time (in hours), noting the voltage at the end. The only other thing you need to know about the battery is how to check the liquid levels. It can be really difficult, so what I’ve done is cut a short piece (about 6") of brightly coloured plastic pipe, measured the exact
a real punch. DC electricity and equipment also only works when you connect everything correctly. If you don’t, either nothing happens or you fry your investment. Always remember - RED is for (+) LIVE and BLACK (-) NEGATIVE. If you are worried about bare ends touching during installation then tape them over temporarily. Whenever connecting the battery (and this applies with cars too) always attach the positive first. Disconnecting remove the negative first.

CONNECTING UP
Start by doing the cabling between the charge controller and the 12 volt socket for the house, followed by charge controller to the clamps that will eventually connect to the battery terminals, but don’t fit them yet. Then between the inverter and the clamps, again don’t connect. Followed by the fused switch to the battery clamps, ditto. Then the display panel to the charge controller. Finally from the fused switch to the solar panel(s), after making sure the switch is in the OFF position and the panels are covered with something lightproof. Do not join one panel to another, run a short length of cable from each to a connector box. When that’s all done, and having checked again everything is cabled up properly, it’s almost time to make the final connection to the battery. First though ensure the terminals are clean/ shiny (a wire brush is perfect for this) and smeared with some Vaseline to prevent corrosion. Fit the positive (+) clamp first, tightening with a spanner, then the negative (-). If you’ve done all this correctly (no loud bang/ bright flash/ or puff of blue smoke) then the charge controller leds should light up with the correct sequence, and the display panel show the voltage in the battery. DO NOT connect any appliances/ load yet, as the battery still has to be fully charged. To do this open the fused switch, align the panel(s) with the sun, and check with the display panel for a voltage/ wattage.

Aligning the panels. This is really easy (though it took me a year to

winter). Make sure it comes with the all-important display panel [in volts/ watts/ and amps] and enough cable to reach into the house. - battery. As this can be by far the most expensive part of a system, always go for the cheapest option then look after it. Ignore everything dealers/ installers tell you (they work on commission), and stick with 12 volt, there are many other voltages available, all far more efficient, but commensurately expensive, plus all the other parts of the system will have to be that voltage too, not a good path to head down. Buy a single battery, otherwise if one fails then they all need to be replaced. I reckon the ideal capacity is 200–250 Ah. Be warned though these are really heavy, you will need at least two very strong people to carry/ manoeuvre them into position. - inverter. This is what transforms the battery’s DC voltage into 220– 240 volt AC, so you can use conventional appliances (12 volt DC appliances run direct off the battery). Choose a model that produces a sine-wave output. This is more expensive, but sensitive appliances like computers won’t work otherwise. For up to 170 watts of panel(s) you don’t need anything bigger than an output of 100 watts. Make sure it has silent operation too, as the cheaper models have really annoying noisy fans. - cable. DC voltage has one major drawback, it loses massive amounts of precious energy between each bit in the system (as much as 60%). So the first thing you have to do is design everything so it fits together as close as possible. You’ll also be using much thicker cables than 240 volt AC appliances/ installations. For runs outside they will need to be fully UV resistant too. To work out what size is required, use the following sum:

\[ \text{in mm}^2 = 0.0546 \times \text{Amps (max from panels or turbine)} \times \text{distance (m)} \]

Also most of this equipment only accepts up to 2.5 mm² cable, so you will need short pieces of that to wire into an appropriately sized

starters, that still leaves 65 days when there might not be any usable sun at all, between Nov–April, which means during those months half the time. Dealers/ installers will tell you they can cover this by adding more battery capacity to tide you over. In theory yes, except not only does it cost a lot more (to buy and replace), will you have enough sun then to recharge this extra capacity?

Bearing all this in mind, the next question should be: IS ALTERNATIVE ENERGY FOR YOU?
Are you just looking for an expensive toy (or for it to be part of a system with a petrol generator), so it doesn’t matter if it doesn’t work all the time? Or do you really want to be totally dependent on it? Do you feel able to maintain and repair everything? Are you prepared to drastically change how you use electricity? Because if there is any doubt stick with a mains connection and skip the rest of this chapter.

When you live a conventional life it is impossible to imagine another way of doing things. Let alone one where your dependence on electricity will have to shrink to a tiny proportion of what you currently consider essential. Only being able to use appliances for a fraction of the day, sometimes not at all. Or that many of the appliances you are used to relying on simply won’t work. It also requires organisation and to be able to flow with the vagaries of the weather. Here’s how we do it. Our first priority every day is to charge the battery, which is for use only during the evenings. Until that is done we cannot use any appliances. The battery we have at the moment is an off-the- shelf car/ van type, rated at 180 Ah, and the process takes around half an hour in summer to all day in winter. There are two 50 watt solar panels to do this (wired in such a way to give 100 watts at 12 volts), mounted on a pole which allows us to orientate them to follow the sun all day. When the battery is charged, and then only if there

There has been a lot to learn, far more than any books or courses will tell you, but it has all been positive, enough for me to feel able to write about how ours works so others can use it as a base to build their own. But before I get onto the technical stuff, here are a few thoughts about what you need to consider first, when choosing a system.

Cost. Two reasons why we wanted to generate our own power were: a) alternative energy is a limitless source of free power, so once we’d bought the equipment our outgoings would be zero, and (b) if we bought land where there was never any hope of getting a mains connection, the difference in value would be enough to pay for the entire installation. Both proved false. In Spain (and some parts of Portugal) land in the countryside is undoubtedly a lot cheaper, but only where no-one in their right mind would ever want to live. Also, buying the system is not the end of the story.

To start with all this stuff is ridiculously overpriced (even if you do the installation yourself). For example, when we last used the mains our consumption was down to an average of 25 Kw units a month (check with your last bill to appreciate how small that is). To match that, off-
the grid, would require a set-up costing £15,000 (or £600 per Kw unit).

Then there is the depreciation factor. This is something I hadn't even considered. Nothing lasts forever, and some day it will all have to be replaced. The salesmen will tell you 10-15 years is the average for most of the bits, some longer (panels for instance, but meanwhile losing efficiency) others a lot less, especially if you have the misfortune to be struck by ~ lightning/ high wind/ flash flood/ or theft. Even more important though is how you look after it all. The batteries for example, which can be the most expensive part of a system, could last twenty years or as little as one depending on how you treat/ maintain them. Not looking so free or cheap now, eh?

Even we have to put aside £100 a year for replacements, and that's for a system that generates no more that 5 Kw units a month.

Suitability. Choosing the most appropriate system. Happily we are not the only ones to have made gross errors in judgement, every installation I've seen has at least one glaring fault - panels sited at the bottom of deep dark valleys/ fixed in one position so they only get a few hours of sun each day/ some even facing in completely the wrong direction/ wind turbines mounted far too low/ two near here that are totally surrounded by trees/ water turbines where the source is dry for most of the year. But say you did manage to get everything right. Then you still have to reckon with the unpredictability of the raw material. Because no matter how good your site, how big or expensive your system is, you can't control when or how sunny/ windy/ wet it will be. Take here for example. On paper the classic site for solar. A clear horizon, from the NE in the morning (at the height of summer) right round to the West, and an average of 300 days of sunshine a year. What more could you ask? Well for is still sufficient sun shining, we can use appliances, up to a maximum of 50 watts at a time, for as long as there is still full power coming in (not on cloudy days). This way the battery only gets used at night, during the day appliances are effectively running directly off the panels (don't worry if you can't follow that). An hour before the sun sets we stop using appliances. The battery then becomes our source of power. Except instead of its potential 180 Ah, we only use 10% (18 Ah). This sounds crazy, but there's a very sound reason why. Battery life is measured in a predetermined number of complete discharges. If you never let that happen expectancy is dramatically extended, possibly by up to 10 years (25 for alternative energy types). 18 Ah, for those who have no idea about electrical terms, translates into usable power like this: 18 x 12 = 216, where Ah x voltage = watt/ hrs. That means an appliance which uses 100 watt can be run for 2.16 hrs. It's not a lot, but using low-energy or 12 volt appliances makes a big difference. A 12 volt/ 10 watt light bulb for instance (equivalent to a 60 watt conventional one) will last 21.6 hrs. We watch films on our laptop, the sound fed through a car stereo, and that uses hardly any power.

On the days when there isn't any sun (until we build a wind turbine) we adapt. Either putting off jobs that require electricity, or using hand-powered alternatives ~ like a treadle sewing machine/ washing clothes by hand/ hand-cranked mincer/ wind-up radio/ candles/ a broom/ and of course the whole spectrum of hand tools.

Commitment. Despite its potential to save our planet, generating electricity by alternative energy is always going to remain in the domain of a minority ~ those who are truly dedicated. You are not going to find a local dealer/ installer who is prepared to help you or turn out for emergencies. Nor can it think for itself. You have to do (and know) everything. From realigning the panels every half hour, to remembering to lock them down each night and when the weather turns nasty. Constantly aware of what is happening so things run smoothly, and spotting problems early enough to order replacement parts. The panels have to be kept clean. The battery has to be checked and kept topped up, at least once a week. Do this diligently and all will be well. You will also be rewarded by the knowledge that your system is at least four times as efficient/ cheaper than if you didn't.

HOW TO INSTALL A BASIC SOLAR SYSTEM - FOR TWO PEOPLE
- panels. Buy the best make possible, german or at least an internationally well-known brand, but not BP as their products are terrible. 100 watts of capacity is fine, but ideally I would have chosen 150-170. If you have more than one panel make sure they all have the same number of cells, or fit a diode to ensure the power flows only to the charge controller. Second-hand is often as good as new, just check the cells are all still functioning first. This is done with a multimeter. Each cell generates around 0.55 volts in full sun, so just divide the reading by that to see how many are good. Anything over 12 volts will charge a battery but the higher the voltage coming in the better.
- fused switch or plug/ socket. This is to isolate the panels when you need to do maintenance. Make sure they are rated at 150% of the maximum that could pass through.
- charge controller or regulator. The box of electronics that takes the raw power from the panel(s) and feeds it to the battery, in a way that is ~ safe/ charges most efficiently/ and cuts off the current when the battery is full. The most modern type using what is known as mppt technology, which is more expensive than a standard controller but will more than pay for itself in performance (especially in the connector box for the thicker cable. Cut corners and it could result in the cables heating up and catching fire.

SETTING UP
Not only does everything need to be as close together as possible, the inverter has to be in the house (so you can switch it off when not in use), along with the display panel for the charge controller. Everything else goes outside, not outdoors though, somewhere dry/ cool/ frost-free. We built an extension onto the house for this, which doubles up as the tool-shed.

The solar panels will need a mount, do not buy one of these, use the drawings on our site to design your own and have it made up. Main things to bear in mind ~ it needs to be able to cope with high winds/ swivel to stay aligned with the sun/ as low as possible to conserve rigidity and make it easy to clean and maintain the panels.

The charge controller is fixed to a wall, behind which you need a metal sheet (galvanised is perfect) or spacers to help dissipate the heat. Mount the fused switch nearby. The inverter fixes to a wall too, as does the display panel (remember to put it where it can be read easily). You'll also need sockets, for both the 12 volt supply and 240 volt supply, located as close to the rest of the equipment as possible. Mark the 12 volt socket so you know which is the positive (+) pin, as well as on all the plugs of your 12 volt appliances.

SAFETY
Important stuff to remember. People will tell you 12 volt DC electricity can't kill. Wrong. If you accidentally (or thoughtlessly) allow the positive battery terminal to touch the negative one, with something that conducts electricity (metal, wet hands, etc), it can pack