

# THE SIMPLE LIFE

YOUNG FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS ARE INCREASINGLY DITCHING THE RAT RACE FOR SOMETHING ALTOGETHER QUIETER. BUT IS LEAVING THE CITY A MOVE FOR THE BETTER... OR THE WORSE?

Text Anne Schaffer Interviews Kit Heathcock Photographs Michelle Snaddon, iStock, supplied

**O**n a bad day at work, chances are you yearn for a life in which you're not battling traffic to get to an office you'd rather not be in. You fantasise about a place where you'd have time to do the fly-fishing for which you bought that top-of-the-range equipment, and daylight hours to ride with the kids on that brand-new mountain bike. How realistic is the simple-life idea? Or will you be asking yourself the same question at the same time in the same traffic next year?

Increasingly, say those in the know, it *is* realistic, and the traditional 'escaping to the country' market of retirees is being joined by younger couples and professionals. Technology means working remotely is entirely possible, sophisticated freeways give easy access to big cities, small hospitals are opening outside the cities. Everything you can do here, you can do there. Well almost.

As leading estate agents concur, it's about lifestyle first, everything else thereafter. In a nutshell, younger families are moving out of the major cities to access a healthier, grime-free, more wholesome, less stressed lifestyle for themselves and their children, ideally with space, little traffic, perhaps wildlife and small-community life. As Seeff Cape Country MD Ian Badenhorst put it, 'For many, the desire is to slow down and get back to basics, which means forgoing some of the luxuries and economic benefits of city living. Buyers are often quite prepared to make that change. Many start small businesses, and this has greatly contributed to the tourism growth in the countryside and smaller villages.'

We can't pretend there's no crime in smaller towns, but it's perceived as less and different.

Many agents say families feel safer in the country than in the city. Judging by the comments, it boils down to a smaller community knowing everybody, pulling together, and caring about that neighbour whose name you know. That's a harder barrier to break down than high walls and anonymity.

What about the economics of a move like that? Can you downscale, reduce your cost of living and remove the financial pressures you're under? Yes, you can, depending on where and how you choose to live, say the agents countrywide. Comparing apples with apples, property is less expensive, rates are lower, insurance and security bills lower, and the cost of staff/wages less. Fuel costs are often higher, but unless you're commuting to work elsewhere, this shouldn't play a significant role. Linked to that, provisions can be more expensive (if you aren't growing them), but most who live in outlying little towns become great planners so shopping at the nearest big town or city is a strategic bulk-buying expedition. Entertainment costs plummet, because the bright lights are few, and entertainment is local and community based.

Jacques de Beer, Pam Golding Properties' area principal for Oudtshoorn, reckons costs are 30 to 40 percent lower in his region: 'There's no need to keep up with the Joneses, entertainment is nearer and cheaper - you're happy with quality time spent at home or with friends; no need to eat out or club. Schools, insurance, wages, club fees and food are definitely cheaper, too.'

One of the reasons to move to the country is to wean children off trawling shopping malls and get them into the healthy outdoor activities for which many country towns are renowned. It's strongly about quality family time and nurturing

## IN SEARCH OF SPACE TRACY WALTON

**MOVED FROM** Cape Town to a smallholding between Malmesbury and Philadelphia seven years ago  
**BUSINESS** Runs casting agency *Colt Talent* (*colttalent.com*).  
*Part of the business is run from home, with a studio in Cape Town*

I grew up on a farm and have always seen the value in wide open spaces, especially for children. We wanted to create some 'breathing space' for ourselves away from the hustle and bustle of city life - the traffic and rush of everyday living.

**Both my husband and I work from home.** We still need to attend client meetings, though with Skype and other technology, the necessity of driving into town has lessened. Finding a stable phone-and-internet connection was one of the biggest challenges, and we ended up building our own internet tower to facilitate a strong, reliable connection! On the plus side, living on a smallholding gave us the space to expand the buildings to incorporate storage

and office space, and we save a lot of time by not sitting in traffic.

**One of the biggest rewards** of living out here is being part of a community - something we never had living in the suburbs. It takes time, but we have created lasting friendships with a wide range of people in our area. And to see cows, horses, wild birds and the occasional buck every day against a backdrop of stunning sunrises, sunsets and beautiful sunny days is amazing.

**There are schools** within a 20-minute drive and we lift-club with our neighbours. Our kids have developed friendships with children in the local community, often just walking 10 minutes through a field to a play date. And the time they spend outdoors, the relationships they have with

our animals and the ability to roam and have 'free play' are really invaluable.

**We have experienced less crime** here than in the suburbs. We are part of various Facebook and WhatsApp local community groups where any instances of crime are posted so everyone is aware if there are certain issues. It's important to become part of the local community so that you have a support structure.

**My advice to others** considering a similar move would be to understand that it will change certain areas of your life radically... and to be prepared. Ensure you are not too far from schools if you have children. And get to know people in your local community as soon as possible so that you don't feel too isolated.

This page, from top: Dassieshoek Valley in Robertson's Langeberg Mountains/Michelle Snaddon; Little Farm in Wellington/perfectideaways.co.za Opposite: Die Laaitje in Dassieshoek Valley, Robertson/perfectideaways.co.za





relationships, which often take a back seat under the pressures of city life.

Retirees are still key drivers in this market, but increasingly, it's not elderly retirees looking for frail care – instead, these are young, active over-50s starting a new economic life, who no longer need or want the bright lights. Across the board, agents have seen an increase in young families relocating, and it's altering the property landscape and community dynamics. Maureen Rowlands, manager of Pam Golding Properties' Hilton office in KwaZulu-Natal believes, 'Retiring to the country is a thing of the past. Retirees go into retirement facilities with frail care and top security. The young couples with young children are looking for the healthiest villages but within reach of cities and airports, and with good schools in the area. Country, but with benefits.'

Where are they all going to? Many different towns. The definition of 'country', too, needs to be made with caution. What's 'country' today may not be quite as far off the beaten track tomorrow – as more people move there, the chain stores are hot on their heels.

Many choices are made on the basis of time spent in holiday homes in the area, allowing the family to get to know the opportunities and community, and making it feel like a 'safer' bet. The infrastructure of smaller towns is often of concern, but today many have hospitals within easy reach, improved internet access, good or great schools and a Plan B if they have municipal water or electricity issues.

The hospitality industry is still the most popular means of generating an income, but in some towns, the seasonal element takes getting used to. Agents say it's about saving in the peak season for the off-season, or finding another source of income in those down times. Some areas create out-of-season events, like the KZN Midlands' Drakensberg Challenge Canoe Race, and a host of cycling and horse events. Many people who live in small towns have another source of income, more than one business or a second passive income. But the consensus is that you can survive on less in small towns, and people get very creative.

Lifestyle farms are very popular, and although they're often about the space to ride your horse, there are income-boosting opportunities such as growing small olive groves, farming organic vegetables, commercial adventure activities like canoeing, an art gallery and wedding venues.

Can you sell your city home to create a cash cushion to establish a new county life or business? Myles Wakefield, CEO of Wakefields Real Estate, says 'It's rarely a financial decision. The choice is lifestyle.' Wakefield talks about PPEs – Professional Personal Entities. He says country living isn't about learning to live without, it's about learning to live with. 'PPEs, by virtue of their expertise being centred in themselves – technology, science, sports, authors, crafters – can be based anywhere. They are the business.'

**'We always wanted to move somewhere quieter when we retired but then we thought, "Why wait for retirement? Let's do it now while we still have our kids around." Money and careers take second place. Time goes so fast – we wanted to be a part of our kids' growing up'**

But of course, if you're selling a high-value property and even a business in the city, you're going to have that cushion which, aside from anything else, gives you breathing space.

Do your homework, say the agents. Speak to locals and estate agents, trawl the internet, speak to the schools, visit the police station if you want confirmation of crime statistics (suggests one agent), and look closely at the town. Will it suit your needs? Is it a practical choice? Can you afford to live far from a city or will one hour's drive be the great interim move for you – a chance to test the waters perhaps?

### SMALL TOWNS, BIG HEARTS

We spoke to agents and, although there are some trending country towns, it seems that generally there are more complex reasons for choosing a particular town. Here are a few of the top towns outside the Big Three.

#### ■ NEAR DURBAN...

##### HILTON AND NOTTINGHAM ROAD

**Why move here?** For a number of the country's top private schools like Hilton, Michaelhouse and St Anne's, as well as the agricultural college, Treverton, in nearby Mooi River. Great hospitality opportunities surround the Midlands Meander Route, plus a wide range of wedding venues, related services and lifestyle spas. Well sited between Johannesburg and Durban, with easy access to Howick/Pietermaritzburg and the Drakensberg: 'Unlike coastal towns, Hilton doesn't experience seasonal changes – it's not a holiday destination,' says Maureen Rowlands, manager of PGP's Hilton office. On the flipside, Barbara Becker of PGP Nottingham Road, says, 'The economy and industry in Nottingham Road are based on the influx of people on weekends and holidays, and that's a part of life here.'

##### HIMEVILLE AND UNDERBERG

**Why move here?** For the glorious countryside with spectacular views, and all the landscape elements necessary for adventure activities, plus great entrepreneurial opportunities for the bold and brave. Smallholdings ideal for those keen to combine a home with a business involving hospitality, fishing, horses or adventure.

#### ■ NEAR JOBURG...

##### DULLSTROOM

**Why move here?** It's the fly-fishing capital of South Africa, about 2½ hours' drive from OR Tambo International Airport on the main route from Johannesburg to Kruger National



### THE DESIRE TO SIMPLIFY INKY DRESNER

**MOVED FROM** Noordhoek, Cape Town, to two acres in George four months ago  
**BUSINESS** Founder-MD of media-relations consultancy Soapbox Communications (soapbox.co.za)

**I felt like a very large hamster on a wheel** that always spun faster while I never caught up. We had a fourth child unexpectedly at the ripe old age of 41 (me) and my hubby (43). It rocked our world, as well as our finances and organisation. Working full time for oneself and looking after four children wasn't working. We always wanted to move somewhere quieter when we retired but then we thought, 'Why wait for retirement? Let's do it now when we still have our kids around.' Money and careers take second place. Time goes so fast – we wanted to be a part of our kids' growing up, rather than feel like an audience. **We had our eye** on a beautiful eight-acre piece of land 10km from George but, after a couple of near-death skids on the mountain roads in

the lovely Garden Route drizzles, we decided it wouldn't work – not with four kids at school all finishing at different times. When an almost two-acre property came on the market just 50 metres from the gate of the school we'd chosen, we jumped at it. It had the space we needed – for six dogs and our three horses, and, boy, is it magnificent watching them eat/roll/snooze in the garden outside my office window. It's an old house needing renovation, but with a beautiful garden, peace and tranquillity, and I don't spend three hours a day in the car doing school lifts! **I had to learn all kinds of new technologies**, such as voice-over-Internet protocol (VoIP), so that work numbers could stay the same.

Fortunately, the business is very computer-/email-/Skype-orientated so it has worked well. We make a concerted effort to stay in touch with clients and friends. A Telkom ADSL line was easy to apply for, and there are very good businesses in George to assist me, the technophobe. I commute once or twice monthly to Joburg and Cape Town – George has an amazing airport, which is only 15 minutes' away. **You have to want to simplify**, to slow down, in order to enjoy the country lifestyle otherwise you will bump your head in frustration at the speed things happen. But the quality of every minute and the wonderful sense of peace make it so worth it. If you have the urge, do it! But be organised, prepared and... just breathe!

This page, from top: Little Farm in Wellington/perfecthideaways.co.za, Langeberg Mountains, Robertson Opposite Die Laaitjie in Robertson/perfecthideaways.co.za

## GOING BUSH MICHELLE DU PLESSIS

**MOVED FROM** Joburg to a house on Tintswalo Safari Lodge outside Hoedspruit in December 2013  
**BUSINESS** Managing Director of the Tintswalo Lodges Group (tintswalo.com)

I wanted to give my son the opportunity to be raised in the bush and my last-born teenage daughter the chance to be exposed to a more experiential bush lifestyle as opposed to the challenging, busy Joburg teenage scene. We lived here previously, also working for Tintswalo. When our son arrived in 2006, the Tintswalo group started expanding... as did my post. I was promoted to our head office in Johannesburg but we knew our true roots remained in the bush. Joburg was both an incredible and a tough time, and we grew as a family. When the manager at the Safari Lodge resigned last year, my husband jumped at the opportunity to become General Manager there, while I remained in Joburg for six months. I then

approached the owners about working remotely from Safari Lodge to continue running the Lodges group. They agreed! It wasn't easy at first. You need to be superorganised and in constant communication with your team. I travel to Joburg once or twice a month and set all my meetings for those days. Every second month, I travel to Tintswalo Atlantic in Cape Town to meet with the GMs there. I also do a couple of two-week marketing/sales trips a year to the UK and Europe. Having access to the internet makes things really easy. Skype is handy and the telephone beats all lines of communication. I have incredible support from my husband and my mom, who often travels up to assist when I am away on long trips.

**My five children range in age from 20 to eight!** The timing of our move was perfect as my youngest daughter was starting high school. My elder two are studying in Grahamstown and Johannesburg respectively so were not impacted much, but I had to arrange a foster family for Alex who is completing her matric year, as moving her was not an option. My youngest two attend the Southern Cross School in Hoedspruit (where their older siblings went eight years ago). The only challenge is the distance to school: 65km each day. We have a driver, though, so that saves a lot of time. We make an effort to get to Joburg as the children still have a lot of friends up there and, of course, to spend time with my older daughters.

Park, on the Highlands Meander. Barely noticeable seasonal ebb and flow, so good start-up tourism potential for trout fishing and other outdoor activities. Significant hotel groups buying in the area – a strong indication of good investment potential.

### NELSPRUIT (WHITE RIVER AND SURROUNDS)

**Why move here?** Nelspruit is no little country town, but it's the Lowveld, or fondly, Slow Veld, in recognition of its relaxed pace of life. Carien Brink, MD of Seeff Nelspruit, says the area offers excellent schooling (including private schools), and, being a stone's throw from Kruger National Park, offers opportunities for entrepreneurs in the tourism and wildlife fields: camping, hiking, skydiving, game and bird watching, and outdoor living. Smallholdings are increasingly popular (investment opportunity exists as landowners subdivide large agricultural properties to make one hectare plots available), with unspoiled indigenous bush as well as a good climate to grow your own fruit and vegetables; opportunities for organic living, small food-related businesses and a healthy lifestyle.

### HARTEBESPOORT (OR PECANWOOD)

**Why move here?** It's only 70km from Johannesburg and agents say young people are moving there to escape the rat race of the northern and eastern suburbs of the city. Previously a second/holiday home destination, Graham Blanckenberg, MD for Seeff Hartebeespoort says, 'You get much more house for your money, and although it's close to city amenities, you're still right in the country.'

## ■ NEAR CAPE TOWN...

### KAROO

**Why move here?** Genuine, small, arty-crafty communities and country living. The homes, history and architecture, together with a variety of towns with different characteristics to suit everybody, from lifestyle farms and smallholdings to the popular classic Karoo period home. The cost of living is low as there's little on which to spend your money. Very much about lifestyle.

### BEDFORD

**Why move here?** Pretty little green town, with a more temperate climate and better rainfall than most Karoo towns. Off-season, the town hosts music concerts, Bedford Soul Food Festival, Garden Festival and art exhibitions to up the hospitality offering. Filled with artists and the self-employed. Recently, wind farms are providing entrepreneurial opportunities. Close to Addo, National Mountain Zebra Park and Shamwari.

### OUDTSHOORN

**Why move here?** Halfway between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth – close to George and the Garden Route – it's drawing young families from Gauteng, the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Prices have been static for the last few years, but recently started to rise – registrations have also jumped of late. Most popular are smallholdings, as well as a few new smaller gated estates. The hospitality industry offers opportunities, but new businesses – particularly franchises – are also rearing their heads.

### MONTAGU

**Why move here?** Only 2½ hours from Cape Town, so good access without it being on your doorstep. Growing trend of foreign earners who put down roots here, install their families, then travel/live abroad. Used to be a traditionally Afrikaans speaking farming community, but now more cosmopolitan with large local English-speaking population, as well as noticeable influx of foreign buyers who used to be 'swallows', but are now more permanent. The trend is to buy property in town, rather than on farms, with more new-builds than fixer uppers as previously (still has a retirement factor, which may account for the lack of interest in maintenance-demanding properties). The small business sector is healthy, and many smaller entrepreneurs are running one-man bands. Employment is also in the hospitality and agricultural sectors (the hot springs are a further draw card).

### BREDASDORP

**Why move here?** Only 2½ hours' from Cape Town, so can commute if necessary, or until a second local business has got off the ground. Many buyers have started small tourism-linked businesses, contributing to the tourism growth in the area. Others, particularly the young, work from home in the fields they always did. Agents says the town draws mostly the over 40s, but there's a definite increase in younger families – the major demand is for family homes.

### MALMESBURY, TULBAGH, RIEBEEK VALLEY

**Why move here?** Riebeeck Valley is the busiest, Tulbagh is quiet and Malmesbury, with its typical country atmosphere and slower pace of life, is a bit of both. Historically, there was a sizable foreign component here, but now it's a younger mix of families and entrepreneurs. Some commute to Johannesburg weekly, others drive the one-hour trip to Cape Town daily – the new double-lane highway to Malmesbury is nearing completion and will improve accessibility and commuting times into the Swartland. Residents are often involved in home-based and/or creative businesses: architects, writers, artists, website designers, and shop and gallery owners.

### PAARL, WELLINGTON, FRANSSCHHOEK

**Why move here?** The Cape Boland is easily under an hour from Cape Town but offers a great country lifestyle in the beauty of the Winelands/farmlands – some lifestyle estates offer sensational mountain views. Property prices are on the rise in these active towns, which have a broad range of accommodation options, good schools and the opportunity to commute or work locally.

### BLOMBOS COAST (WITSAND, STILBAAI, RIVERSDALE)

**Why move here?** Traditionally, Western Cape coastal towns appealed to families from Gauteng, Limpopo and Cape Town – the addition of a hospital and day clinic is wooing expatriate pre-retirees and retirees to the town (that, and the weak rand). For Capetonians, the area is much closer than other Garden Route destinations, and seafront and riverfront properties zoned agricultural (30 up to 450 hectares) are more affordable. Lifestyle farms are also big draw cards.

