

'Wwoofing' teaches urbanites countryside ways

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Nicole Long (L) and Sarah MacClellan, wwoofing volunteers from the US, work on a farm in Gourin on June 21, 2013. World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms is now growing in France where farmers greet a wave of acolytes changing the face of the sustainable exchange movement.

Making the switch from urban life to rural bliss is not easy. Luckily for city slicker Nathalie, whose dream is to open a countryside bed and breakfast, her "wwoofing" experience on a French farm will give her the skills she needs.

World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (Wwoof) began as a fad in 1970s England but is now growing in rural France where [organic farmers](#) greet a new wave of acolytes changing the face of the sustainable exchange movement.

Wwoofing, which has existed in France for at least 20 years, gives urban dwellers the chance to try their hand at earthy pursuits such as vegetable cultivation, cheese-making and sustainable construction.

Farmers offer their "wwoofers" a bed and board in exchange for their labour.

For Nathalie, a graphic designer in her forties who has always lived in the city, wwoofing is helping her make some big changes to her life.

"I'm in the process of selling my apartment and setting up an eco bed and breakfast with an organic garden," she says, admitting the [lifestyle change](#) is a challenge.

"I'm a real city person, so I have to learn everything," she says.

Much of the satisfaction of wwoofing comes from pitching in and learning as part of a larger group.

"This whole experience will be beneficial for the farm I want to buy," Nathalie says, preparing for a weekend of stuffing straw insulation into the walls of a new building.

For Nathalie and her ilk, wwoofing is an opportunity to meet new people, get to grips with sustainable farming techniques and live a different kind of life for a couple of weeks.

In 2008, France played host to 3,700 wwoofers, but just four years later

this had grown to 10,000 amateur farmers, their ranks drawn from France and abroad.



Nicole Long (L) and Sarah MacClellan, wwoofing volunteers from the US, work on a farm in Gourin, France on June 21, 2013. Wwoofing gives urban dwellers the chance to try their hand at earthy pursuits such as vegetable cultivation.

The number of hosts has also multiplied in the same period from 321 to 800 in 2012, according to the Wwoof association in France.

Cecile Narbonnet of Wwoof France believes the "spirit of sharing" is the key to the movement's success. "We share experiences and exchange knowledge, without involving money or any subordination."

In Brittany, wwoofer Sarah has spent the morning pulling weeds out of the ground at the Moulin Coz organic farm.

The 20-year-old American says she is spending time there after a year spent perfecting her French in the southern city of Montpellier.

"The way of life here interests me," she says, conceding her main motivation is to practise her language skills.

"It'll be useful" for if she achieves her dream of becoming a midwife for an aid organisation where often "French is the second language", she explains.

And learning "new words related to agriculture" is just a bonus, Sarah says.

For Wilma, a 22-year-old from Berlin, wwoofing is more of a philosophical pursuit, of "experimenting, with nature, in a village, on a farm".

"I know I won't always live in a big city," she adds, as she tends the land at the Pachamama organic farm in Saint-Brice-en-Cogles, north of Rennes.

For farmers, the experience is equally enriching, giving the hosts the opportunity to learn new things.

Nicolas and Anne-Sophie, vegetable farmers in the west of France, have already learned a lot from their first wwoofers.

They discovered veganism from their visitors, eschewing the consumption of all products derived from animals.

"It was very enlightening," Nicolas says, "We ate differently and they taught us about their diet."

Before the wwoofers came along, farmers "lived alone, isolated", says Delphine Morel, who runs Pachamama.

"Now people come to us, and we look outwards onto the world outside," she says with affection.

Simone Heidrich, sitting in her yurt at Moulin Coz, agrees. "As soon as we started cultivating our crops, we couldn't really get out any more," she says.

But today, for this veteran traveller who has lived on three different continents, the world comes to her, thanks to her woofers from across the globe.

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