

Choosing the Green Road

A former race and rally driver has traded his beloved 4x4 in on a bicycle and is sampling life in the community with the lowest recorded ecological footprint. But is this living, Geoff Dalglish wonders?

Can I, with hand on my heart, look my beloved daughters in the eye and say: "I've done my best to ensure that you inherit a better and healthier world?"

Oops, that's a tricky one.

If I rewind a little more than a decade each of my days was tyre-shrieking, turbocharged fun, even if my indulgent lifestyle did require the equivalent of around six Planet Earths to remain sustainable – the norm among South Africans living in the more affluent suburbs!

I jetted overseas every few weeks for the launch of an exciting new car or to attend a grand prix or international motor show; holidayed in the Maldives and lived in a wonderful house near Kyalami set on two hectares, with never fewer than three cars in the garage.

Life was good and a move to Cape Town made it even richer as I scaled down dramatically and discovered the joys of hiking in the mountains.

But was my shift in consciousness enough?

Mahatma Gandhi famously said: "Be the change you wish to see in the world," also insisting that "there is enough in this world for everybody's need, but not enough for anybody's greed."

I kind of wish he hadn't been so persuasive, as I loved my old life with its jet-set travel, fast cars, land-bruising 4x4s and fine cuisine, even if many of the ingredients were imported rather than being Proudly South African. Hey, Zuma and Malema aren't the only ones who can order French bubbly by the bucketful!

Funnily enough a major turning point came after an ego-flattering invitation to be the only South African to attend a Bentley car launch in San Francisco, even being asked to nominate my airline of choice. I decided on Richard Branson's Virgin Atlantic - flying 'Upper Class' of course. I could become accustomed to sushi, a free haircut and a relaxing Jacuzzi in the plush business class facilities before takeoff from Heathrow, followed by a soothing in-flight massage from a delectable therapist 10 000 metres above the Earth's crust.

Then that irritating little inner voice began nagging: does anyone really need a R3-million, 300 km/h luxury car; what will the launch do to your personal carbon footprint; and what's the relevance in a country with massive unemployment and fellow South Africans living in shacks without proper sanitation and safe drinking water?

So with quivering lower lip I declined.

Fast forward to April 2010 and I'm not quite wearing lentil shirts and sandals made from recycled sheep droppings, but I no longer own a car and I'm walking my talk, sampling life in the community with the lowest recorded ecological footprint in the developed world (for a trial period anyway).

If you are interested, Findhorn can be found on Google Earth in the north-east of Scotland abutting the North Sea.

It is here that the now-famous Findhorn story started in 1962 at a quirky old tin caravan where community founders Dorothy Maclean, Peter and Eileen Caddy and their three sons lived.

Making headlines around the world they 'co-created with nature,' achieving the seemingly impossible feat of growing roses in the snow along with giant vegetables that should never have survived - never mind thrived - in such poor sandy soil.

Soon people came from all over to experience for themselves 'the magic of Findhorn,' the community's website enjoying more than 600 000 visits last year.

Today we find a sustainable-living community of around 500 souls that not only boasts the lowest recorded ecological footprint in the developed world, but is widely respected as a United Nations-affiliated educational centre and a pioneer within the growing Global Ecovillage Network that attracts thousands of visitors and course participants each year.

Around the original caravan, which stands in the same spot it was parked all those years ago, has grown a celebrated ecovillage with whirling wind turbines to generate electricity, solar panels to capture and store sunlight, organic vegetable gardens and an ecological sewage treatment system called The Living Machine that was the first of its kind in Europe. It uses a natural process of plants and bacteria to break down and transform human waste into clear, clean water.

Recycling, as you'd expect, is pervasive in daily life as residents try to lighten their ecological footprint; reducing, re-using and repairing. In a small wooden shed known as The Boutique locals donate whatever has outlived its usefulness and are free to help themselves to cast-offs. I source a much-needed British adaptor plug while another 'shopper' gratefully tries on warm winter woollies.

Perhaps predictably Scotland's love affair with whisky also finds innovative expression in unusual circular wooden homes fashioned from whisky barrels, taking recycling to new levels.

Since arriving several weeks ago my life has changed radically and mostly for the good. My Eco footprint has shrunk. I've only travelled in a car twice, once when a bunch of us went to see *Avatar* in Inverness, 40km away, and again last weekend when we headed into the Highlands for a major mountain hike.

On each occasion I chipped in some fuel money, which is the norm here.

So what's it really like?

Life is simpler. I live with three others in a comfy Eco-home made mostly from local materials, stroll to vegetarian meals in the Community Centre and walk to my unpaid job as a journalist in the Communications office.

Once a week I do 'KP' – the acronym for kitchen party which means cleaning up after a meal and washing plates, cups and cutlery.

Every three weeks I join Homecare for a couple of hours which usually involves cleaning residences used by visitors, the job entailing anything from making beds to scrubbing floors or toilets.

But it is done with a smile, Findhornians subscribing to the belief that "work is love in action." KP is often accompanied by music and laughter and a motto is: "If it isn't fun it isn't sustainable!"

Sharing is a common theme, whether it is an unbundling of how you are feeling physically and emotionally, or a non-monetary exchange of talents or services. Most activities begin with an attunement: participants holding hands in a circle and focusing on the moment with gratitude for the gifts and possibilities of the day. Yes, I kid you not, but if you are grateful, how can you be dissatisfied with your lot?

The full name of the community is the Findhorn Foundation, so as not to be confused with the adjoining village of Findhorn where the more conservative citizens regard their neighbours suspiciously as hippies and nudists.

And maybe there's a grain of truth there: I did once leap naked into a frozen loch and through the steam of an outdoor hot tub I glimpse others who are definitely attired only in their birthday suits.

But I marvel at the sense of peace and caring I experience in the crime-free environment, and thrill to the way I am constantly encouraged to examine all the bigger issues of life. Who are we? Where are we going? Is there a way out of the mess Spaceship Earth finds itself in at the beginning of the 21st century? Can we build a new social paradigm where money and economic growth are not the primary motivators? How can our spirituality impact positively on the world?

Here people are encouraged to always question, knowing that it is at the edge of our comfort zone that life begins.

Many also feel enriched by the vibrant arts and culture scene: the nearby Moray Art Centre is a celebrated showcase of creativity while the Findhorn Universal Hall is the liveliest performing arts venue between Aberdeen and Inverness.

I'm amazed at the depth of local talent and moved almost to tears by the haunting voice of former Findhorn resident Elizabeth Rogers, a New York-born singer-songwriter.

It is a cosmopolitan environment with so many nationalities from all walks of life, including at least half a dozen South Africans.

Refreshingly we never worry about burglaries, muggings or this week's Government scandal, although our thoughts are with loved ones back home.

Avalon dos Santos, a 31-year-old advertising art director and designer, is enthusiastic: "It is a very deep and rich experience living in community with like minded people and I am grateful to be able to practice what I preach. Work, play and spirituality are all combined and I don't have to spend 45 minutes in a traffic jam to take part in any of it!"

Lisa Sutherland, a 40-year-old fund raiser and mother of two, says: "I like being part of this social experiment in peaceful and sustainable living practices that started even before I was born."

Would you want to live here?

It's not Utopia. It's remote, although connected by good public transport; winters can be brutal; the incredible tranquillity is often shattered by aircraft taking off and landing at the adjoining Royal Air Force base; and most residents live simply on less, although they argue that being part of a warm, nurturing and loving environment is priceless.

I love it but yearn to see loved ones and think often of the incomparable Cape scenery and especially my regular overnight stays in the Mountain Club hut on Table Mountain, and walks on Noordhoek Beach at sunrise.

There are also the challenges of living and working in close confines and I do sometimes long for my home in Kommetjie with its privacy and views.

And Yes, I miss driving although I don't need a car.

But funnily enough where my fantasy used to be exotica like the multi-million Rand, 362km/h McLaren F1 sports car, I now look longingly at fuel-sipping minicars like the dinky Toyota Aygo parked near my office. Smaller even than a Yaris it would be perfect for those rare times when I want to spread my wings and fly!

Visit www.findhorn.org