

Techno Peasant

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I've just been talking to one of the local shepherds. He wanted to know if we like sheep's cheese, and because we do, he has promised to bring us two big cheeses next week, in exchange for us letting him graze his animals on our lower terraces. Standing there, in the sun, the sound of the sheep bells jingling I couldn't help but think "what a fantastic life we live".



We are lucky enough to live on a 2 hectare organic smallholding, with south-facing terraces, and a stunning view of two mountain ranges - the Serra de Estrela and Serra de Açor - in central Portugal. We grow much of our own veg, have 400 vines, 60 olive trees, chickens, geese, and ducks in a pond fed by a natural spring. Our water comes from our own well. We are 5 minutes from a thriving village, 10 minutes from a small market town, 40 minutes from the historic university city of Coimbra and 2 hours from Porto.

We've been working this farm now for two and a half years, learning as we go. It sure has been a steep learning curve - I'd never done building, farming, wine-making, vine pruning, olive harvesting or had animals until we came here. And let's not forget learning a whole new language to be able to interact with the locals. We seem to be getting there with Portuguese, it is so nice to be able to chat with the locals, and actually understand what they are saying.

Yesterday we started our olive harvest. Last year we picked over 1000 kilos, which produced just over 100 litres of the finest, organic, cold pressed, hand-picked olive oil, some of which we sold to a London restaurant.



Along with one of our regular WWOOF (willing workers on organic farms) visitors (this one is from New Zealand), we started on the trees around the house. First off we picked to make eating olives, around 30 kilos. These will be soaked in water for 10 days, changing the water every day. Then salt water is added, along with a wide variety of the herbs we grow, or that grow as 'weeds' (we planted loads of different herbs, only to find they grow wild all over the place!). This salt water

solution is changed every 10 days for 40 days, or until they taste just right - the most fantastic olives you have ever tasted!

Today it is raining. Much appreciated rain I must state, after almost 18 months without. The countryside is green again, and it is incredible how fast plants grow after the autumn rains start. If the downpour lets up later, I intend to go wandering around the forests, find us some edible mushrooms for risotto dinner, perhaps with a few glasses of our home-made red wine.

Meanwhile, sat here in the warmth of our wood range, its great to have the rain as an excuse to do some computer work. We became members of the Pure Portugal co-operative in 2003. Aware of the need to generate cash income, the plan was to promote small scale and eco tourism in this part of Portugal. We love it here so much, we thought others would appreciate it as a holiday location. And being "techno peasants" seems to work for us.

Many aspects of our life here are very basic. But Portugal's almost complete broadband availability enables us to make a living and keep in touch with friends and family back in the UK. To me, it is a perfect mix, a near perfect life. The slow pace of life, clean air, fresh water, friendly neighbours, and plenty of outside work complements my computer addiction!

Downsides? Not many. The Portuguese driving habits take some getting used to. The summertime forest fires can be worrying, although the risks can be reduced. This is something else we are working on, promoting an information CD entitled "Gardening With Fire: the essential self-help manual for home & garden design in areas at risk from fire.



Do I miss anything from the UK? Not really, maybe the occasional pint of warm ale - but mulled wine, that I know contains nothing except grape juice because I made it, has to be just as good. And I certainly don't miss the hustle and bustle of the UK rat race. Not saying there has been no stress in our time here, but it is a different kind of stress. A more laid-back stress, over solvable problems.

Well the rain has stopped. Time to go in search of those chanterelle mushrooms and to pick some veg from the garden