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QUALITY TIME: EcoVillagers value time together through shared meals and activities.

# the village people

It takes an EcoVillage to raise earth-conscious children. Take a tour of the community in Ithaca. by Claire Napier-Galofaro

AILEEN FITZKE says she's not getting paid to lead me on this tour, but since it's such a nice day, she doesn't mind at all.

She can't be serious. It feels like 97 degrees, it's unbearably humid, and we're about an hour into a tour of the 175-acre EcoVillage at Ithaca complex. She points out the swimming pond, and I manage to control my impulse to kneel down and lap up water like a dog.

Fitzke happily trots along the trail pointing out the sauna, the community garden, and the sheep pasture. I'm trying to focus less on the dryness of my tongue and more on how lovely it is walking along a 6-inch-wide trail mowed into the grass of EcoVillage's wide-open field. Two miles away on my right, the city of Ithaca rests at the bottom of the hill. To my left, the 60-home village sits a few hundred yards away. Everything in between is just green.

When the tour began, she asked what I thought of EcoVillage. "Great," I said. "It's not what I expected." "What did you expect?" she asked. Err. I sheepishly replied that I didn't know what to expect. I wonder if I would have

received such an enthusiastic tour had I answered more honestly with any of the following words: commune, hippies, or tie-dye.

I know what you're thinking — I'm an idiot to assume 160 people simply wanting to be good to the Earth must be a bunch of Birkenstocked hippies. Maybe you'd also expect braided-flower crown wielding welcome troupes at a place called EcoVillage. No such luck.

It's much like a normal suburb but with cooler houses, and walkways instead of streets.

It's much like a normal suburb but with cooler houses and walkways instead of streets. They have satellite dishes. They shower often and for as long as they like. No one scowls at my absurd number of belongings that require electrical outlets to function.

I realize quickly that I probably won't find any back-to-the-land dance circles. When my disappointment subsides, my first stupid question surfaces: What the hell makes this place so ecologically important anyway?

Liz Walker, EcoVillage's director, says that in 1991, she and a friend decided to create an experimental cohousing community dedicated to living more lightly on the Earth. Five years later the first 30-home neighborhood,

JIM BOSJOLIE / RESIDENT PHOTOGRAPHER

known as FROG, for "First Residents Group," was completed. In 2002, families moved into SoNG, the equally-sized "Second Neighborhood Group."

Both neighborhoods are deserted the afternoon of my tour. Everyone's attending a festival in Ithaca. I wander, relieved that no one's around to eye the stranger suspiciously.

The neighborhoods are made up of a long street separated by a pond and open space. The houses in FROG are uniform, designed from four basic plans. The two facing rows of homes are set closely together, giving it the look of a European village with impeccable landscaping and kid-sized bicycles. The houses are a rich brown with big windows and wisteria climbing up the front. SoNG's residents had more freedom designing their homes. Most share a rustic wood finish, but vary in size and shape with front doors painted every color of the rainbow.

Fitzke explains that the duplexes are intentionally narrow and close together. The phrase "small footprint," which EcoVillagers use generously, is not as esoteric as I assumed.

The founders purchased the land from a development company that intended to use it for a similarly sized development. Walker says that EcoVillage set aside 90 per-

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cent of the land as open space, a striking comparison to the 10 percent reserved in typical developments. "This provides a key model that is very different and essentially turns land use patterns in the U.S. on their heads," she says.

The homes use a variety of green building practices, including passive solar design and double-wall construction insulated with 6-inch cellulose. The residents of SoNG were more experimental — some of their homes utilize straw bale construction, composting toilets, and solar hot water. Each neighborhood has a common house for community meals, offices for sale or rent, a guest room, and shared laundry.

They share compost bins and an extensive recycling system that includes bins for sneakers and batteries. Fitzke says the village accumulates only one dumpster of trash each week.

In the carpools, I'm investigating the variety of bumper stickers instructing me to kill my television and asserting that God is not a Republican, when I run into Jeff Schwartz, who moved to EcoVillage only two months ago. He hasn't driven his car in weeks. He struggles with the intimate nature of the village, but he says the ecological efforts — like shared washing machines, ladders, and lawn mowers — make the struggle worthwhile.

"Americans have been so used to having our own separate everything, we've forgotten a lot of the skills of how to live together in a community," he says.

Many EcoVillage residents believe communal living and sustainability are inseparable. Some, like Schwartz, came for the "eco" part and are learning to live with the village, but most seem primarily interested in the community — the proximity, the shared "everything," the regular group meals.

This part I don't get. EcoVillagers share things, and it saves the Earth — that's great. But I don't understand why everyone hangs out so much. Rod Lambert,

**HUFF AND PUFF:** This straw bale home was built with farm waste products.



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a man with a bushy white beard and pencils in the front pocket of his shirt, sighs at hearing this, and then invites me to sit with him in front of his house.

"This is a schizophrenic culture where we idolize tycoons with mansions on big lawns with high fences and electronic gates," he says.

Using four gardening tools, Lambert demonstrates that a person needs four things: the self, family, community, and the world. In modern American society, the middle two are missing, he says, leaving the individual alone in the world. He wants to bring these missing elements back for his children.

EcoVillage has been called a utopia. They greet each other by name. They live in beautiful, sun-drenched homes. They have libraries with no checkout or return policies. They live by the honor system. Children wander the streets because nothing bad can happen with all of their neighbors keeping an eye on them. Fitzke knows that they must have rules, but she really can't think of any.

But most of them chuckle at the idea of being a perfect society.

Even Walker finds it difficult to label the village and its people flawless. "We did not, for the most part, grow up in environments where we were taught how to share, trust other people, open our hearts, and listen carefully to what other people had to say," she says.

Families have left because they couldn't handle it,

Walker says. The residents make decisions together and are expected to volunteer several hours each week within the community.

I volunteer for dinner-making duty. The cooks ask if I have experience cooking for 60. Uh, no. My communal sharing is limited to giving roommates leftover Chinese food and regretting it come lunchtime the next day. I am delegated lettuce washer, and I proceed to self-consciously dissect EcoVillage-grown lettuce under careful watch.

During dinner, parents discuss noisy teenagers and dirty dishes in the sink. Children crawl from lap to lap. I can't tell which ones belong to which parents.

My first friend at EcoVillage, a young boy named Andrew, walks by and waves.

When I first arrived he was walking down the long driveway. "Is this EcoVillage?" I asked him. "Yep," he said.

"Want a lift?" I suddenly realized I was a stranger luring a child into my car. He got in, unfazed. I considered warning him of the dangers of getting into cars with strangers.

That night I called my grandmother. She cautioned me of the perils that plague me on a daily basis, as usual, this time focusing on the potential for a roadside attack. "It's a dangerous world," my nana said. I thought of Andrew and how his world seems a little less threatening.

Maybe this community thing's not such a bad gig.

Then I imagined having a hundred nanas, and changed my mind again. 🌱

**LILY PADS:** This 30-home neighborhood, known as FRoG, was the first installment of houses in EcoVillage.



JIM BOSJOLIE / RESIDENT PHOTOGRAPHER (STOCK PHOTO)

### EcoVillage at Ithaca

Rachel Carson Way, Ithaca, NY  
www.ecovillage.ithaca.ny.us

#### Upcoming events:

Creating Sustainable Communities:  
The Social Dimension

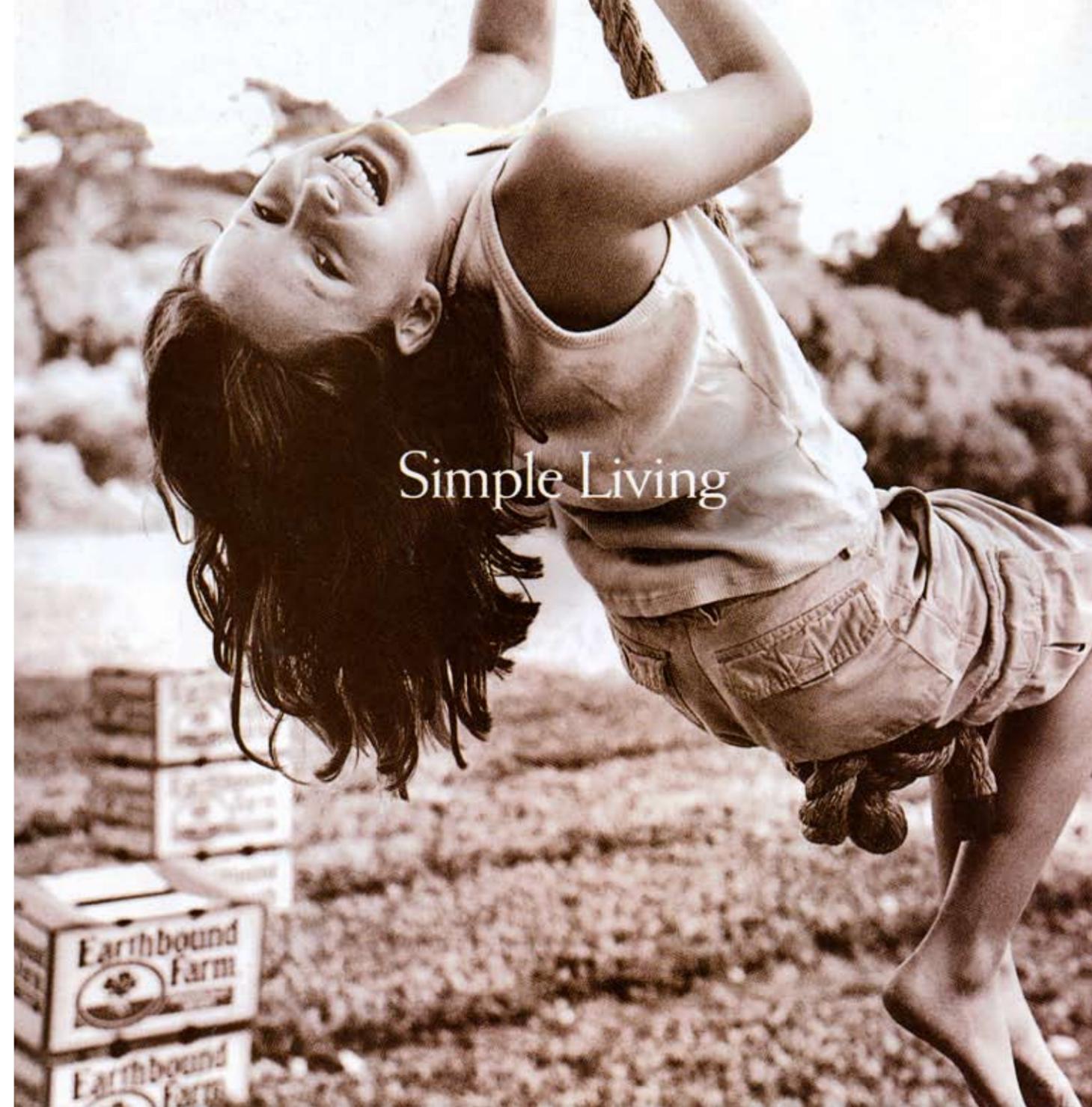
July 7-14  
\$900-1150 (including room and board)  
Commuters pay \$750

#### EcoVillage Experience Weekend

Sept. 7-9  
\$225-325 (including room and board)  
Commuters pay \$150-225

#### Upcoming projects:

A third, more affordable housing neighborhood and education center



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