

A photograph of a wooden walkway leading through a dense tropical jungle. The path is framed by a wooden archway made of two large tree trunks. The walkway consists of wooden planks and stone steps, leading into the distance. The surrounding vegetation is lush and green, with various plants and trees. The overall scene is a beautiful, natural setting.

paradise FOUND

The residents
of Costa Rica's
Finca Bellavista
live in a village of
interconnected
tree houses

Like nature? Neighbors? Looking to make a change? You may want to check out life in one of the many high-density, health-focused sustainable communities sprouting up around the country. **Kiera Carter** considers leaving the city for greener pastures

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liza Bacot first visited the eco-friendly planned community of Serenbe three years ago. She had heard there was an organic farm and went with her husband in hopes of finding a new local source of produce. The day they visited, there was a block party happening all throughout the tree-lined streets of the neighborhood, located 45 minutes south of Atlanta. “It was surreal—we ended up spending hours chatting with people and later made our way to the farmhouse restaurant for a farm-sourced meal,” says Bacot, 36, a nurse practitioner.

On the way out, the couple bumped into a Serenbe real estate agent and made an appointment to return and learn more. Six weeks later, they were in contract to build an energy-efficient house near the farm. And 10 months later, to the surprise of all their city friends, they actually made the move.

“When we told people we were moving to a green, sustainable community south of the city—which is serious country territory, not the usual Atlanta suburbs—they’d look at us like we said we were moving to M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Village*,” says Bacot. The couple was nervous, too. “We actually kept our town house closer to Atlanta for a while and split our time between the two,” she says. Eventually, it became clear where they wanted to live long-term. “We were so much more stressed when we were in Atlanta, while life in Serenbe felt effortless and natural,” Bacot explains. “A year later, I switched hospitals to one closer to Serenbe; then we sold the town house and never looked back.” Now her commute is the same distance as it was when she was living near Atlanta.

Bacot isn’t the only young, professional urbanite trading concrete for community. Around the world, and especially in the U.S., development of neighborhoods focused on sustainable, healthy living has increased. These range from places like Pringle Creek Community, a sustainable development in Salem, Oregon, that was founded by a local family, to Kukui’ula, a resort-like island paradise run by a Hawaiian development company, to Mueller, a “new urban village” three miles from downtown Austin, Texas, that’s home to 5,000 people. Self-proclaimed modern utopias have been around since the 1960s, but they used to have a hippie vibe and tended to attract people who wanted to get away from the world. Now, the appeal seems to be the opposite.

“There’s an instinctive urge to create small communities surrounded by nature,” says William Forbes, Ph.D., associate professor of geography and sustainable-community development at Stephen F. Austin State University. He notes that this trend has been on the rise for decades, in part as a response to the isolating white-picket-fence suburbanization of the 1950s. “On top of that, sustainable, organic lifestyles have become more mainstream and desirable, especially as we see things like [the water crisis in] Flint, Michigan, in the news.”

Makes sense—in theory. But who really lives in these places? Can an office-going, lipstick-wearing woman actually fit in? And do the communities have enough culture

to rival city life? I have a personal investment in these questions. My now-husband has been making a case for leaving New York City ever since we got engaged a year and a half ago. He's a freelance writer who focuses on the outdoors—hiking, camping, you name it. That means (a) he can work anywhere, and (b) access to green space would work to his advantage. (True story: He once set up a tent in our tiny Brooklyn apartment and slept in it.)

To be fair, I see the appeal, too, especially as someone who loves organic food and running trails—and hates having tents set up in her living room. Still, I need a little more than “nice neighbors” and organic food to persuade me to accept a longer commute to work—and a potentially creepy commune vibe.

So I went straight to the source: women, like me, who had already moved to these places. As it turns out, they all agreed: nope, not a hippie commune. When 35-year-old communications manager Mckenzie Farrell first moved to Pringle Creek, where there is zero rainwater runoff to the surrounding city's storm-water system and all buildings must be certified as eco-efficient, she says she worried that if she didn't recycle her trash correctly, she would be banished. “There actually are some folks here who produce one grocery bag of garbage in a whole year, but others are nowhere close to that level of green,” she says. “No one judges each other.”

That said, not all communities are as flexible. Just take a look at the directory on ic.org—the Fellowship for Intentional Community, which helps hook people up with planned communities and cooperatives, large and small—and you'll see postings that say things like “vegan only” and “organized around sharing almost everything.” There are villages of multiple homes with guiding principles that are not enforced, and then there are communities where everyone lives in one house, shares the same religion and/or diet, and splits child-rearing responsibilities. As an introverted meat eater, I'll be avoiding the latter. But I still worry that these places attract a lot of the same types of people, which would be a problem, since I really like the diversity of a city. Would I feel like I'm living in a bubble?

Michele Bartlett, a 46-year-old director of career development, says she loves living in Hidden Springs, Idaho, a rural community with a shared barn, farm, and orchard that was designed to preserve open space and minimize car travel. But, she admits, there is a downside. “It's a very upper-middle-class place, and

there's not a lot of diversity,” she says. “Critics will compare it to Pleasantville or Stepford, and that's not totally inaccurate.”

Mueller, located on the site of Austin's old airport, is less homogeneous. Janeka Rector, a development specialist who lives there, says her neighbors are racially and ethnically diverse. Plus, 25 percent of the residences are reserved for households that make less than 80 percent of the area's annual median income (\$43,600 for a single-person household; \$62,250 for a family of four). But it can still feel movie-set strange at times. “Google is testing self-driving cars in our neighborhood,” says Rector, 38. “And influential people, like the mayors of other cities, have their eye on Mueller to see if this way of life can be replicated in other places, which kind of makes it feel like you're living in a surreal experiment.”

But for many, the upside of being part of a social experiment on a grand scheme is, well, the socializing. “All of the houses in Mueller are pretty close together, and we have front porches, so we congregate on someone's patio every Friday and hang out,” says Rector.

Adds Bacot, “I can't tell you how many times I've taken a ‘quick’ walk around the lake only to end up having wine on someone's porch for hours, sometimes a stranger's.”

Meanwhile, I've been living in New York for a decade, and I've never once befriended a neighbor—something that's starting to sound a lot sadder. But, hey, I have easy access to everything I could possibly want: museums, theaters, bars, restaurants, and friends I can visit without getting in a car. Why give all that up for a porch?

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acot tells me she didn't have to: “I'm more connected to arts and culture now than when I lived in Atlanta. Serenbe has a theater and an artists-in-residence program that puts on plays, concerts, and poetry readings every week.”

And, according to Farrell, “Pringle Creek is about three miles from downtown Salem, 60 miles from the coast, and 65 miles from the mountains. It lets you do any activity you want.” And that's where my husband's argument comes into play: These places have easy access to activities—the kind that happen off the porch. If you've ever been to New York's Penn Station on a Friday night or sat in summer-weekend traffic, you know how hard it can be to leave a city and get into nature. Sometimes, it almost doesn't seem worth it—so maybe you pop some wine on your fire escape and convince yourself that the city is the best place in the world, even though you only go to the theater twice a year and don't have time for the renowned restaurants anyway.

That's why I got a serious pang of longing when Bartlett told me that she hikes with her friends almost every morning: “We're right on the Boise foothills, so we can literally walk out the door and go on a hike.” On Saturdays, Bacot often takes pop-up yoga classes on the lake dock near her house: “Afterward, I'll walk home, make breakfast using eggs from the farm, and eat on my porch overlooking the lake.” My post-yoga experience? Sipping a \$12 smoothie on the subway, hoping I get a seat when my legs are sore.

In lots of ways, these places seem like little cities: You have access to organic food the way you might in a more cosmopolitan area, you can walk everywhere, and you're constantly interacting with other people. But with all these similarities, I wondered if there was the same sense of exclusivity and types of requirements that co-ops in large urban areas are known for. (A few years ago, my husband and I attempted to buy an apartment in New York City—a process in which we prepared 300 pages of references and documentation, only to be rejected for reasons we'll never know. They never even met with us.)

Turns out, it's not like that at all. Some communities do require you to pay neighborhood-association fees (at Mueller, they're \$47.50 a month) or adhere to eco-friendly building

1. Finca Bellavista homeowners can rent out their tree houses to vacationers.
2. The front patios of Garden Court homes in Mueller, near Austin, Texas, face a shared open space.
3. Most villas in Kuku'i'ula, a luxury resort community in Koloa, Hawaii, have an open-living design.
4. Kuku'i'ula residents can harvest vegetables from the community's Uppcountry Farm, which also hosts monthly outdoor dinners





5. From one Pringle Creek home with a green roof, a neighboring home with solar panels is visible. 6. The labyrinth on the grounds of Serenbe, a community near Atlanta, was designed with stones from around the world. 7. Serenbe's organic farm has a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program that offers members a share of the weekly harvest



practices, but none of the ones I checked out had an interview process to get in. And the houses are typically affordable for the areas. A three-bedroom home in Pringle Creek will set you back \$345,000, which is comparable to prices in nearby Portland. For her house in Serenbe, Bacot says she paid slightly more than she would have for a similar place in the Atlanta suburbs. "But we have built-in water conservation and a floor plan that optimizes light, so we don't use as much electricity," she says. "It also has more efficient geothermal heating and air-conditioning."

Even with arguments like that, I don't know if I'm ready to make the move. We are, however, planning a trip to an eco-friendly community in Costa Rica this spring. Finca Bellavista is a 600-acre village in the rain forest that also allows you to rent tree houses for a vacation. Even better, if we were to buy one (land starts at \$35,000 for half an acre; then we can build a "studio" tree house for about \$30,000), we could rent it out to vacationers when we're back in New York. Best of both worlds, maybe?

Regardless, I will be applying some of the lessons I've learned to my life in New York City: There's no farm, but I have farmers markets I could visit more often. I may not have a porch, but I have friends I should stop flaking on in favor of working late. And I most certainly have neighbors I could invite over for a glass of wine. I might just make that last one my New Year's resolution. **mc**

