

Going green in London

Monday July 9, 2007

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London seems greener than ever this summer. On June 21, the Lights Out London campaign had city-dwellers plunging into darkness at 9pm to save energy on the longest day of the year. In fashion, a cotton eco-shopping bag is all the rage. And London is now the hub for carbon emissions trading worldwide.

I, too, find myself living an infinitely greener lifestyle than ever before. Growing up in America, my sister was the environmental conscience of our family. She carefully taped and folded discarded Christmas wrap in the vain hope that we'd re-use it next year. If I failed to finish that last carrot or lima bean, she'd whisk it off my plate to the compost heap. Meanwhile, I was well into my 30s before I stopped mourning aerosol deodorant spray.

I'd like to say that my conversion came about when I rented *An Inconvenient Truth*. A light bulb went off in my head (energy saving, to be sure) and I realised, in keeping with the movie's title song, that I 'was asleep... and I had to wake up' and do my part to save the planet. But the truth is, I've embraced environmentalism entirely by default. After living in London for the past 10 months, I'm too poor to be anything but green.

Take cars. Before moving to London, I would never have survived without a car, let alone two. Owning a car is, after all, the ultimate expression of American identity: it embodies freedom, autonomy, and the ability to recklessly endanger those around you with impunity. When I first arrived in Britain, I felt almost naked without the tank-like sanctuary of my Volvo station wagon. But even if I could squeeze a vehicle into the geometrically challenged, cobble-stoned alley that passes for our street, with the cost of living in London what it is these days, I feel lucky to own a toaster, let alone an automobile.

My husband now commutes to work by bike. To our friends in the United States, this is wildly impressive (if also a sign that he's lost his marbles). For him, it's a useful way to channel his previous fetish for sunroofs and peppy engines into the more affordable boy-toy world of fluorescent panniers and ergonomic handgrips.

Exercise has also taken on a greener valence for me. In America, membership at health club was routine. But on a London budget it was the first thing to go. My health club is now Hampstead Heath, a large, hilly park near my home. True, if it's been raining – and despite global warming, this *is* London – my run is broken up by intermittent periods of mud sliding (I've come to think of this as a form of interval training). But at least I can rest easy knowing that *I* did not deface Mother Earth to make way for another elliptical machine. Plus, on any given day, it's possible I'll collide with some unusual form of wildlife (foxes, rare birds, George Michael); what's not to love?



Exchanging gym membership for fresh air **Photo: Martin Argles**

Finally, there's domestic life. I was excited to learn that our tiny mews house came with an all-in-one washer/dryer. 'What a great way to save space!' I thought. But after three hours on the 'dry' cycle, the clothes were still moist and wrinkled. I'd like to tell you it was the prospect of wasting energy that drove me to rush out and buy a bunch of washing frames so we could start hang-drying our clothes. But in reality, it was the spectre of the impending electricity bill. The same goes for that dishwasher we don't have. Didn't someone once say that washing dishes by hand builds character?

Of course, the longer I live a green lifestyle, the more I embrace it. Just the other day, the organic grocer handed me my shopping in a bag made from potato fibre. I found myself wondering how it would taste with ketchup.

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