

Plan your ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY



After five years presenting *Escape to the Country*, **Jules Hudson** offers his hard-won advice on moving to the countryside – including where to buy and common pitfalls to avoid

“I bought a view, and a house came with it” was more or less how Winston Churchill described Chartwell, his own escape in Kent, when he acquired it back in the early 1920s. Whether we can afford a country estate or a terraced cottage, or we want to be surrounded by glorious isolation or enjoy the delights of a village community, the sliding scale of what the countryside can offer is unrivalled. I have yet to meet anyone who hasn't, at some point in their lives, dreamt of finding a different, and imagined to be simpler, lifestyle away from busy urban life.

I also count myself extremely fortunate to have helped many who have shared that dream. But while the lure of fresh air and open spaces is tangible, is there something more intuitive in our relationship with the countryside that continues to attract, beguile and inspire us?

Throughout a lifetime both living and working in the country, I have often wondered. My suspicion is that it's all down to history. Up until the 18th century and the Industrial Revolution, most of us would have lived in the countryside; it afforded us space, land upon which to produce food and rear livestock, and raw materials

with which to build a home. As creatures that evolved in the natural landscape, we feel deeply at home in the outdoors, even if it's buried in our subconscious. The countryside was, and in many ways remains, the great provider.

The growth of towns and cities has meant that many of us need to go back many generations to find our rural roots but, rest assured, we all have them. My own experience while working on *Escape to the Country* has provided a fascinating insight into the aspirations that many have to 'live the dream'. I have met a myriad of people in a

wealth of places up and down the UK, but while each combination of buyers and properties is unique, there are traits and features that are common to us all.

Understanding these pointers can prove invaluable in setting out to find your ideal escape. Over the next few pages, we explore some of the things I have learnt and shared over many years, and that I hope will help you to turn your hopes and aspirations into reality. If you have been thinking about it, why not make 2013 your year of change? The countryside may not be as unfamiliar as you think. »



There are many things to consider to ensure that a move to the countryside, such as here at Buttermere, Cumbria, turns into the rural dream

Photo: Getty

Where to look?

I'm often asked where the best places to live are. The truth of course is that it's such a subjective decision; it's impossible to answer definitively. However, there are areas that, while ever popular, can have their drawbacks; what's more there are other much less well known that are a delight and can deliver much more value for money. Here are my top 10 destinations and a few suggested alternatives. We've also taken a look at how far your money might go in each area...



1. Forgotten Northumberland

The north-east is an area I fell in love with more than 20 years ago. Since then, every visit has been a treat. As an archaeologist, I recall my first trip to Hadrian's Wall. This extraordinary feature of the landscape stretches out between two seas, cutting the country in half. The landscape either side of it is littered with pretty towns and villages, such as Hexham and Corbridge, which owe their origins to the Roman Legionaries that first ventured northward and then stopped to consolidate the edge of the Empire. The uplands are as dramatic as any in the Peak District or North Yorkshire, but you have the benefit of Newcastle with its bright lights and airport to hand, as well as the wild beauty of the coastline and Kielder Forest just a short drive away.



Lowgate, Hexham, Northumberland
The Old Chapel, offers in region of **£165,000**
A detached, two-bedroom stone property. Features gas central heating and double glazing.
Estate agent: Northumbria & Cumbria, Hexham

2. The Cotswolds – and Northamptonshire

The Cotswolds are perhaps the destination of choice for many, particularly if you live in or around central England. Hugely popular with weekenders and locals alike, the region's seemingly endless picture-postcard villages such as Burford, Bourton-on-the-Water and Broadway, built of warm, golden limestone, have defined country life for many who now eulogise the area. But it is expensive, and you may feel like you are living in a goldfish bowl when besieged with tourists. For a good alternative that's more affordable, check out Northamptonshire; it too is blessed with an historic supply of limestone and a gentle landscape to match. Higham Ferrers, Irthlingborough and Oundle are good starting points.



Stanion, Northamptonshire
Detached cottage, **£249,950**
This Grade-II listed, two/three bedroom cottage offers original features, such as an inglenook fireplace, exposed stonework and beams.
Estate agent: Simpson West, Corby



Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire
Cottage, **£300,000**
This well presented three/four bedroom cottage, in the centre of the town, is currently used as a holiday let.
Estate agent: Mark Annett & Co, Chipping Campden



Burford in the Oxfordshire Cotswolds is a sought after, picture-postcard location with property prices to match



The wild expanse of Exmoor is just a short trip away from north Devon

3. Dorset – and its alternative, north Devon

Dorset is one of my favorite counties. If, like me, you love rolling landscapes full of picturesque villages and timeless views, it's hard to beat. It is also home to a wonderful coastline full of history, dating back millions of years to the Jurassic period. Pretty seaside towns and villages such as Lyme Regis and Bere Regis are popular almost all year round, while ancient market towns such as Blandford Forum and Shaftesbury, with its Golden Hill made famous in the Hovis adverts, seem quintessentially English. However, Dorset's popularity comes at a price; when it comes to alternatives, north Devon will allow you to stay in the West Country, and offer plenty of dramatic coastline to boot, with the added bonus of the Exmoor National Park on your doorstep.

Escape stories...

Alison Howells, of Foot Trails, uses every step of her local countryside to make a living. A keen walker, she was desperate to find a way to make ends meet and avoid having to leave her home on the Somerset/Wiltshire border to find work. She assessed her strengths – she had a degree in business and also knew every footpath for miles around. The countryside was very beautiful and she wondered whether others might enjoy the same sort of landscapes, but with her or her husband as expert guides. She was frustrated by the image of country walking as being an experience that only the super fit could enjoy.

"At the start, the most important thing was sorting out a business plan. Even if you feel you're plucking numbers out of the sky, it's important to put your thoughts on paper. It gives you something to work towards. Of course, you can amend it at any time." And she did a lot of research, considering questions such as: was there a market for what she was planning, was there anyone else doing the same thing, and what could she charge?

Her business, Alison Howells's Foot Trails (www.foottrails.co.uk), began on a small scale, with guided day walks in small groups. These were followed by weekend and longer guided holidays, and then by self guided walking trips. Planned with Alison's knowledge of the local area, walks bypass national pathways and instead follow unique rural trails, with lunch at a pub, followed by afternoon tea.

The idea gradually took off, so Alison entered into partnerships with other small rural businesses. Inn to inn style walking holidays followed, where walkers' luggage is ferried between hotels and country inns. She expanded beyond Wiltshire to Somerset, Dorset, Devon and the Cotswolds, and now employs a small team.

Alison says that her walking company stands out because of its attention to detail – offering bespoke experiences to match the customers' needs. And the biggest challenge she faces now? Slow rural broadband speeds and patchy mobile phone reception. These can make or break a rural business, she says.



Lee Bay, near Ilfracombe, Devon
Detached cottage, **£350,000**
A three-double bedroomed 19th-century cottage.
Estate agent: John Smale & Co, Barnstaple



Shillingstone, Dorset
Thatched cottage, **£349,950**
This Grade-II listed cottage has three bedrooms.
Estate agent: Abbot and Slater, Blandford Forum

Jules says...

Look for bargains but be cautious
The countryside is cheaper, but not always! Yes you will often find greater value for money, but the idea that everything is going for song simply isn't the case. Negotiate sensibly and respectfully. It may be a buyer's market in some areas, but don't think turning up with a pocket full of cash will simply seal the deal. Vendors enjoy selling to people they like; if you want a sensible answer, make a sensible offer.



Alison Howells's walking business now employs a small team and uses local small businesses

Shropshire offers good value for money and stunning hills



Escape stories...

Fergus Collins, editor of Countryfile Magazine, finally moved to the country in June 2012 with his wife and small son after years of prevaricating. "We moved from Bristol to the eastern edge of the Brecon Beacons, where we bought an old cottage on a mountainside with about an acre of garden. We have all the space we ever want, a veg patch, small woodland for firewood and timber, and walks into dramatic and varied countryside from the doorstep. My son seems to grow ever-more confident out in the woods and he is endlessly fascinated by the newts, slugs, slow worms and, when we first moved in, baby birds. My wife has never been happier. "But I have to commute into Bristol at least four days a week and this is very time-consuming, especially in winter, when the trains are predictably unreliable. "And due to the steep nature of our access lane, we have had to buy two 4x4 vehicles and a host of powerful machines – chainsaws, trimmers, leaf-blowers and other items – to keep on top of the land, especially in winter. Our particular choice of location is proving expensive (sometimes scarily so) and every day offers new challenges and new ways of bleeding money. But it also feels like really living."

4. Rugged hills in the Welsh borders

The Welsh borders are a property hunter's delight. They offer wide ranging scenery, from the rich rolling hills of Monmouthshire and the mysterious magic of the 27,000-acre Forest of Dean, to the endless views afforded in Herefordshire. Neighbouring Shropshire is a hidden gem of a county, full of history and character, with some of the most fantastic rural properties on the market, offering particularly good value for money the more you spend. Further north and another border hop into Clywd and Denbighshire will also reveal some terrific landscape with property to match. For many who have not been as lucky as I have to travel extensively around the UK, the borders are often not even thought about. The south-west generally is the urban escapees default, but take it from someone who has travelled widely throughout the borders and now lives there; they are central, beautiful, affordable, and they are most definitely not over-crowded.



Longville, Much Wenlock, Shropshire Cottage, £349,950
This semi-detached three-bedroom cottage is set in beautiful countryside and has large gardens and ample parking. It also has a separate annexe.
Estate agent: Stentons, Much Wenlock



Lavister, Wrexham Cottage, £300,000+
A three bedroomed cottage with a detached garage and good sized gardens. Features Georgian-style windows and quarry tile flooring.
Estate agent: Town and Country, Chester

5. Within reach of London

London has always had an affect on the prices of rural properties that are within its shadow. Traditionally, Kent, Surrey and Sussex have all been favoured by those with deep pockets wishing to commute to the city. These days, it seems most transport links to these areas struggle to cope and are increasingly expensive, as are properties. Personally, if had to rely on London but wanted a rural retreat, I'd pick Suffolk or Norfolk. Here you can still find a genuinely slower pace of life with some fantastic architectural styles on offer, not least timber-framed historic gems. Rail links to London are good, but, if you have to drive, there are many alternative routes available. Bury St Edmunds is a good regional town that serves some beautiful villages, such as Long Melford and Lavenham.



Old Oxted, Surrey Terraced cottage, £348,500
A two bedroomed property with an enclosed internal courtyard and notable period features.
Estate agent: Howard Cundey, Oxted



Hengrave, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk Semi-detached thatched house, £289,950
This 18th-century Grade-II listed property has three bedrooms and a series of sizable gardens.
Estate agent: Sheridans, Bury St Edmunds



Long Melford, on the Suffolk/Essex border, offers rural charm within easy reach of London

Photos: Alamy

Jules says...

Leave room to improve
Odds are, you are going to want to spend some money on your new home. Don't allow your maximum budget to monopolise your search. Knock up to 20 percent off it to allow for improvements, and search at a lower level, allowing you room to invest in and improve your new rural retreat.



Consider constructing outbuildings
Outbuildings are one factor of many house searches that often take up more time and effort than they deserve. Many buyers want them for stables, studios or storage, but only viewing properties that already have them can limit your search unnecessarily. So long as you have space and can obtain the relevant planning consents, building a suitable outbuilding from scratch will probably be cheaper in the long run, and will mean you get what you want.

Beware the holiday romance
I've met plenty of people who've fallen into the trap of wanting to move to a favoured holiday destination, only to find that they can't recapture the fun of a break long-term. Holidaying is a great way to get to know an area, but take time to find your way around the practicalities; get to know the real locals, where is the doctor, the mechanic, the plumber and where do you buy your food?



Fuel
Running a country home often presents options that most urban properties won't encounter. Chances are, you won't be on mains gas, although LPG in storage tanks is now widely available. Usually however, oil will be your heating fuel. I'm an exponent of fuel diversity; don't be entirely reliant on one source if you can avoid it. We run on a range of oil (Aga and heating), wood burners (heating and cooking) and gas (cooking), all independent of one another. Whatever happens, we can always be warm and fed.





6. Don't forget lovely Lincolnshire

Lincolnshire is a part of the country often overlooked. To many it's characterised by the flat lands of the fens. While the reclaimed fenland makes an invaluable contribution to the nation's agriculture, few would call it beautiful; the process of reclamation has meant that much of it doesn't really have a vernacular style of any great form or history. But don't give up on Lincolnshire. Lincoln itself is a vibrant treat, and its upland Wolds are just beautiful, as are the villages around Stamford (above) and Grantham. If you arrived with a blindfold on, you'd be forgiven for thinking you were in the Cotswolds. What's more it's not far to London by train. Lincolnshire arguably offers commuters and locals alike some of the best value for money I have seen.

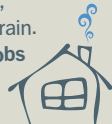


Easton-on-the-Hill, Lincolnshire
Semi-detached cottage, £249,995
A two double-bedroomed property with a lawned garden, outbuildings, and a large garage.
Estate agent: Knight Partnership, Stamford

Jules says...

Finding work

If you are not going to make your living locally and have not retired, this may be your biggest challenge. A long commute can take away a lot of the fun of country life so it's well worth testing out transport networks before you take the plunge. To find work locally, you must be prepared to be adaptable, hardworking and, if necessary, retrain. See www.countryfile.com/ruraljobs for suggestions of how to make a living in a rural location.



7. Cornwall – and its alternatives

Cornwall is one of the most aspirational places to escape to. Popular with many as a holiday retreat, the lure of the coast, the moors and its often-dramatic history of smuggling, shipwrecks, and mining have ensured that Cornwall has an enduring appeal. Prices on the coast are always going to include a premium that can be at odds with the realities of life in a place that is often seasonal. All well and good if you have the money and the living behind you, but if you have to leave the region regularly for work, it really is a long way from anywhere. So if coast and raw countryside is for you, but you need to be within four hours of London, try Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. You'll get affordability with a choice, and some of Britain's best beaches and attractions, too.



Pempwell, Stoke Climsland, Cornwall
Detached barn conversion, £299,950
A three-bedroom property with spacious gardens.
Estate agent: Mansbridge & Balment, Tavistock



Caerfarchell, Solva, Pembrokeshire
Former post office, £250,000
A four bedroom house, 2½ miles from the coast.
Estate agent: JJ Morris, Fishguard



The isolation of Cape Cornwall, near St Just, can be both a blessing and a curse



The Brecon Beacons offers all the beauty of a national park without the high prices



8. Lake District – and wild, central Wales

The Lake District is one of those places that swoons over you as soon as you arrive. Ever popular with holidaymakers and escapees alike, it nonetheless manages to maintain an atmosphere that is both businesslike and relaxing. Prices within the Lake District National Park itself are higher than outside for obvious reasons, but there are good alternatives a short drive away, for example around Egremont and Cockermouth. The only real hurdle with a move to the Lakes is distance. From London it's a good five to six hour hack. So if you fancy a similar feel, with mountains, lakes, and accessibility, Powys in Wales is only three hours away from London and half that from Birmingham. It's home to the Brecon Beacons, and as Wales's largest county, it runs right up to Snowdonia. Prices are attractive, and for anyone wanting lots of property with land and outbuildings, yet within striking distance of the rest of the central belt and the capital, it is certainly worth considering. Brecon itself, Crickhowell, Builth Wells and Rhayader would be my starting points.



Egremont, Cumbria
Mill cottage, £159,950
This 12th-century detached former watermill has two bedrooms. A rear garden includes a patio area, two storage sheds and a summer house.
Estate agent: Lillingtons, Whitehaven



Crickhowell, Powys
Terraced cottage, £219,950
This stone cottage has two bedrooms, alongside a reception room, which can be converted into a third bedroom, and a garden.
Estate agent: Bidmead Cook, Abergavenny

Escape stories...

Colin Salter moved to the Upper Eden Valley in east Cumbria, which had already been his bolt-hole from city life for 10 years before he moved there permanently. "That was our first mistake – if you live in your bolt-hole, where do you bolt to when you need a break? We had both just retrained in self-employed careers – I as a potter, Mrs S as a counsellor – and it seemed as good a time as any to relocate and pursue that rural dream. And that was our second mistake – Eden, nestled between the Lakes, the north Pennines and the Yorkshire Dales, is the least densely populated council district in England. So there were no clients for Mrs S and no customers for me.

"The sparse population was responsible for another aspect of the countryside – you can't choose your friends or entertainment in quite the same way that you can in the city. There simply isn't the range available to allow you to specialise. Although I revelled in chatting with farmers, hauliers, hippies, vets and vicars at everything from pie and pea suppers to quoits contests, Mrs S missed arthouse cinema and being able to meet 'people like us' pretty much from day one.

"We knew very soon that we should abandon the dream. But we stuck doggedly at it for seven long years, scraping a seasonal livelihood. Finally, Mrs S found an escape route from the rural nightmare by returning to academia. So now we live in the city again and can allow ourselves the rural dream once more."



Who could ever tire of the scenery here at Loch Eil, with Ben Nevis and Fort William in the distance?

9. The Highlands – really getting away from it all

The Scottish Highlands provide the most dramatic backdrop to any home; the scale of the landscapes that stretch northward from Glasgow and north and west from Inverness have to be seen to be believed. If you feel that remote isolation is for you, this is where you want to look, yet should you need to you could still find yourself within an hour of both Inverness and Glasgow airports. If you do decide to house hunt here, allow plenty of time: getting around the Highlands in a hurry is not an option. You'll enjoy a slower pace of life here, whether you want to or not. My favourite spots are up on the coast near Fort William; Glen Coe and Ben Nevis are just breathtaking, and tiny villages that pop up around Loch Ness will leave you feeling as far away from the hustle and bustle as is possible. What's more there is a happy irony to the property market up here; while most of us value the remote beauty of it all, it does make things a lot cheaper.



Dalcross, Inverness, Highland
Newton Hall, £335,000
 A four-bedroomed, detached converted school.
 Estate agent: CKD Galbraith, Inverness

Escape stories...

Nikki and Jason Channon had often discussed how they'd like to move to the middle of nowhere. The question was how to fund such a lifestyle.

"We were both professional singers and our base near Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, was perfectly placed for the regular holiday centre work, but we hankered after the Welsh countryside, where we had enjoyed many holidays.

"Come 2009, we were desperate to hang up our microphones, but to make the big move we had to find a way to make our new home work for us. First of all we looked at what would make us happy: mountain biking for Jason and cooking for me. But how on earth could we encompass these passions into a viable business? Both of us are keen skiers, and the result was inspired by how catered chalets operate. We set about finding the perfect property to create a similar experience for mountain bikers – all-inclusive breaks with 'off piste' guiding – a chance for riders to get away from the trail centres and experience the rugged Welsh terrain in the safe hands of a fully qualified guide.

"We had a long list of requirements and not much money but appearing on *Escape to the Country* helped. We found the perfect place – a farmhouse with large barn ripe for conversion into two separate units, right on the edge of Brechfa Forest in Carmarthenshire. Just one problem – we couldn't sell our house. Six months later, my father saw what we were trying to achieve and bought our existing property to enable us to make the move.

"Starting the business was a huge leap of faith, involved a big risk and massive change. Moving to a new country, converting a property at great expense with no experience and then marketing a brand new business concept in a rural area with no budget has definitely been the most challenging time of our lives. Finally, last year, MudTrek Mountain Bike Breaks (www.mudtrek.com) was born and has been a huge success.

"Although hard work, we have the life we dreamt of: our own slice of rural heaven in amazing countryside with incredible views, stunning walks and fantastic beaches not far away."



Nikki Channon left the life of a Somerset-based singer behind to run a guided mountain-biking business in Carmarthenshire »

Photos: Getty

Jules says...



Do you need so much land?

We all aspire to it, but how many of us really know what to do with it? To the smallholder it's obvious, but for the average family home if you don't need land, don't buy it. With prices around the country for grazing and paddocks ranging from £5,000 to £15,000 an acre, those few acres on the particulars will chew up a good piece of your budget. What's more, renting it out will rarely recover its cost. Always ask the vendor if there is room to negotiate on price and the amount of land included. It could save you thousands.

Rent land, don't buy it

The chance to be self-sufficient is one of the great draws for anyone moving out of the city. But it takes time and effort to really make it work, and space. If you don't have the money to buy a smallholding, don't despair. Finding land to rent is a realistic way of giving you space without a huge investment and if you find it doesn't work, you can walk away.



Transport

Getting around is an important consideration; Are you ready to get in the car to buy a pint of milk? Will you need a 4x4 to get you around in winter? Village properties with local shops and pubs, particularly with land, are hard to find. If you are any distance from local amenities, the trick is to plan ahead, not least during the winter. A good freezer will help!

Be prepared for challenges

Don't be fooled, the countryside has its advantages, but easy isn't always one of them, particularly if you really do want to live in the middle of nowhere. You need to plan, be organised in terms of food and weather, and you need to be resourceful. Getting things done in a hurry isn't always possible unless you are prepared to do it yourself. Grasping basic plumbing and building skills will prove invaluable, and often great fun.



10. The New Forest

The New Forest has long been a place synonymous with family camping holidays and ponies. Boasting a population of around 3,000 ponies, the New Forest's most famous and oldest four legged residents have defined the region for many. Historically house prices have been high here, it's long been popular for escapees, and offers a good mix of countryside and coastline, with major yachting and holidaying hotspots at Lymington and Lyndhurst respectively. However, the property market within this wooded enclave is relatively small, and keeps prices high, so you might consider heading further north toward Salisbury, and west into Dorset. You still have access to all the New Forest has to offer, but you also gain a lot more too; life in an area that isn't seasonal, that isn't beset with tourists in the summer months, and a much great choice of architecture and villages on offer.



Ringwood, Hampshire

Detached thatched cottage, £320,000

This two-bedroom property is Grade-II listed.

Estate agent: Woolley & Wallis, Ringwood

Harnham, Salisbury, Wiltshire

Terraced cottage, £270,000

A three-bedroom property with period features.

Estate agent: Jordans, Salisbury

Top 10 places to retire to

According to research by *Guardian Money* in partnership with credit reference agency Experian. www.guardian.co.uk/money/2012/jul/27/top-10-places-to-retire



Get on the show!

Is 2013 a year of change for you? This year marks the 14th series of this long-running property flagship from the BBC. If you would like to join Jules and the team and enlist their help in finding your own *Escape to the Country*, why not apply to be on the show? Your current home should be on the market or sold, and you must be able to take a week off for filming.

Contact *Escape to the Country* via the BBC website www.bbc.co.uk/beonashow

* All properties can be found on www.rightmove.co.uk. Some properties may no longer be on the market: all prices and details were correct at the time of going to press.