

American-born city-dweller Colette takes a stateside view of life in urban France

There was a time, long ago I suspect, when I still had some semblance of personal space. Personal space and a wee bit of sanity.

Now is not one of those times. As I march like a member of the national guard through the metro station, I wipe that silly Midwestern smile off my face and assume the City Stance: shoulders up and back, eyes that could stop a deer in its tracks, and a pair of 2-inch boots that aren't afraid to step on your heel if you even think about slowing down. I'm carrying a Saint Bernard-sized purse to boot, which not only holds my entire life inside but is also quite practical for taking down those teenage girls who clog up the corridors.

As I push past yet another graying man walking at three mph, I let out a deep and very French huff, puffing out my cheeks to breaking point and throwing in an eye roll for good measure. I snicker at the woman who has somehow managed to trap herself between the bar of the turnstile and the metal barrier, her bags wedged up against her face. I tap my metro card over the barcode reader and slide through effortlessly. No one, and I mean no one, will take me off my course.

After three whole minutes of waiting (I am forced to pull out my 200-page novel to cope), the metro finally arrives. I cram in with the rest of the sardines, pressed up against a stocky old man, with my face in a head of black curls (Garnier Argan Cranberry). I'm reminded of my friend Kass, who once said during a particularly packed metro ride in Tokyo: 'If someone touches me, I am going to get pregnant.' We are that close. Three stops later, the cars spit out hordes of people. I am scrambling towards a seat when I spot the doe-eyes of a very pregnant woman. 'Allez-y.' I feel like crying. I pan back to a recent email from my friend in the Dordogne: 'Hi Colette! How is city life treating you? I hope you're still the same person as before and haven't turned into one of those arrogant and pretentious urbanites!' Nah.

Read Colette's blog at

<http://koletink.wordpress.com>



Inspired by permaculture, Stuart and Gabrielle moved from Britain to Brittany five years ago to live and learn alongside their sheep, pigs, chickens and rabbits



Grumble as I might, while out in the winter cold, I really do like the changing of the seasons that we get with a temperate climate. It's never easy dragging myself out of our warm bed to make the first pot of tea and then do the morning rounds of the animals. However, wrapped up in good clothing (including a somewhat rustic Russian-style hat that Gabrielle made out of home-made felt and rabbit skin) and with a bit of winter sun and some work to do, a winter's day does have its charms.

There are certain jobs that are specifically winter tasks such as working in our woodland. During the winter, the energy of a deciduous tree descends into its roots and the leaves fall. With less sap in the wood, logs cut for firewood will season (dry out) much quicker. While dormant, you can cut the whole tree down and yet not kill it. In the spring it will re-grow from the stump, a process called coppicing. You can do the same thing higher up the trunk, above grazing animals' head height, called pollarding. Trees in towns are often pollarded.

There's another version often seen in this area and that's to remove all the side ranches of a tree, typically a hedgerow oak, leaving a rather austere pole, known locally as a *têtard*, shredding in English. Typically, the oaks are cut every nine years and *faggots* made with the cut branches were traditionally given to the local *boulangier* to fuel his bread oven as the farmer's contribution to the village's bread.

These denuded posts used to offend me as I was convinced it was arboreal butchery but, in fact, it's just another form of coppicing and pollarding and actually extends the life of the tree while providing a sustainable harvest of firewood without killing the tree.

We bought 11 acres of woodland five years ago, a purchase that almost didn't happen due to my clumsy *faux pas*. We'd gone for a final walkabout in the wood, accompanied by the estate agent and the elderly owner. I posed a few questions and then judged the time right to mention the price. What I now know is that, in France, and especially when dealing with a distinguished and traditional gent, one does not discuss the price directly but should leave such negotiation to the agent: mistake number one. Mistake number two was to confound the French verb *baisser* to lower, with *baiser*, the French version of our f-word as I asked him if he'd move on the price. His face turned to stone as the estate agent's chin hit the ground and it took a further three weeks of gentle coaxing from the agent before he made a small gesture on the price and the deal was agreed.

Only 25 years ago, the land used to be fields of cereals or pasture and was planted up over the following ten years but not maintained so needed several winters of selective cutting to knock it into shape. As owners of a small woodland, we've had tremendous help from the *Centre Régional de la Propriété Forestière (CRPF)* who have advised us on the management of the wood and helped us obtain subsidies. Each winter's work yields us the heating for our house and gîte for the following year while making the wood healthier.

Centre Régional de la Propriété Forestière (CRPF)
www.crpf.fr

Read Stuart's blog at

<http://permacultureinbrittany.blogspot.com>

