

Joyfully on the road to nowhere

By Ruth Ostrow

LAST week, I overheard a couple on vacation talking as they lay on the beach. It was a conversation I'd had myself many times, before we moved up north, and I knew the sentiments well.

I'm paraphrasing a long discussion but she was essentially saying: "Why don't we live like this all year round? How much money do we really need to be happy? We could sell the house in Sydney and buy a bit of land and live simply. We could commute when we needed to."

He was worried about ageing parents, the problems with flexi hours and the children's schooling. The woman persisted, and I could hear the underlying question that plagues so many people during the holiday season as a sense of freedom and joy permeates our bodies: Why can't we feel like this most of the time? Who is it that makes life more complicated than it need be -- us or the proverbial them?

More and more people are deciding the answer is us, and are voting with their feet. And not just sea-changers like me, who are exchanging the prospect of more money for more time. The latest movement is a trend called urban gypsies.

Originally the movement was jokingly called geriatric gypsies as large numbers of retirees -- the superannuation set -- started taking to the road in droves, living out of mobile homes as they toured the country searching for adventure, wide open spaces and a chance to have the fun denied them over the years of mortgage-paying and child-rearing.

This demographic group is still on the move. But, according to a new book, *Beaches Bush Roads and Bull Ants*, during the past few years the trend has spread to include a wider cross-section of the community. Ian Hamilton, freelance journalist and former Gold Coast publisher, has recently returned from a 12-month, 30,000km odyssey with his wife, Fay, travelling Australia in their 7m motorhome. He has written a book about their journey.

He says on the road they met an armada of urbanites, including burned-out professionals who wanted a permanent holiday from corporate pressures and middle-aged backpackers wanting to explore their own backyard rather than travel abroad in these worrying times. They met parents eager to bond with growing offspring and offer them the University of Life rather than traditional education.

And they met geriatric gypsies, such as one Victorian couple in their 70s, who were approached by their children about checking into a retirement home. Next day the couple hitched up their caravan and vanished for a year. "That was 10 years ago," says Ian. "They are now in their 80s and still on the road and loving every minute of it."

Ian and Fay, who are both in their 60s, say sales of motorhomes, caravans and camping trailers are booming. "We discovered that it's not unusual to wait many months for a new motorhome, while one manufacturer of up-market camping trailers has a waiting period of eight months."

The fact is, whether taking to the road, moving to the sea or going back to basics as in the growing "downshifting" movement, people are beginning to question how we live. All over the Western world, increasing numbers of people are divesting themselves of material possessions and pruning down their work hours to have a richer inner life, making more time for family, friends and themselves.

The Trends Research Institute says 15 per cent of America's 77 million baby boomers will have joined the voluntary simplicity-downshifting movement by the end of the decade. As for sea-changers, Australia's latest national census reveals the fastest growing parts of the nation are located along the coast and hinterlands, where people are seeking to grab life before it passes them by.

Meanwhile, Ian puts the urban gypsy trend down to an inherited Australian pioneering spirit, which he says forces us to continually search for ways to satiate our restless souls.

"Urban gypsies have found an enviable way of life, travelling to far north Queensland, across the Territory, and all points between Broome and the Kimberley," he says. "The obvious place to find them is not only in the countless caravan and national parks dotted across each state but living alongside any creek, beach or picturesque riverbank.

"Communes of like-minded travellers set up camp for a week, a month or more, on million-dollar real estate, and find they not only have a new home but a whole bunch of new friends.

"There is something deliciously egalitarian about camping out in Australia and it matters little whether you're in a millionaire motorhome, the old family caravan or a leaky tent. What is important is how well you cook a sausage, how convincingly you exaggerate a yarn and how big a barramundi you hook for that night's dinner."

It's little wonder he and Fay are hoping to return to their wandering ways as soon as possible.

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