

Earthaven: *Life in an eco-village*

by Judi Burton



You crawl, scratch and rip away at the plastic, artificial surface that seems to be clinging to your daily life.

Like a spider web that never gets fully pulled off your skin, you try to shake off the toxic world around you, but to no avail. Maybe you were supposed to live in a different century, when there was no word for organic or heirloom; it just was what it was. But no matter how much organic food you eat, or how much filtered water you drink, or how many times you ride your bike to work, you will never be released from this modern consumer driven world. You can only attempt, and feel good when you do. But did you know that there is a place tucked in the mountains of North Carolina where the residents have found a way to live within a modern state of mind, while having shed their dreaded toxic ways? Nestled in the Swannanoa Valley—along mountain roads of hairpin turns and steep inclines, laced with craggy cliff faces and boulder creeks—there is a small village called Earthaven. The people who live there have stripped away their mainstream grime and have settled into a tribal pulse, which enables them to live in happiness and harmony with the earth.

When I first heard of Earthaven Ecovillage tucked in the mountains of Western North Carolina, it sounded like a storybook fable to me. It was described as a highly intelligent population of engineers, organic farmers, spiritual healers and green architects. I was shown pictures of people holding hands in a circle, making governmental decisions, and smiling children growing up with a tightly knit group of adults raising them together. I was intrigued and curious to learn if it was a fairy tale or if it was an elaborate hoax to convince world-weary people to relinquish their life savings to a cult or commune.



I drove the five-and-a-half hour journey from Georgetown, SC, and met with Karen Savage Taylor, who is a guide for the village. An appointment is necessary when one decides to visit Earthaven because they get many visitors; otherwise visitors sometimes treat the place like a tourist exhibit instead of an inhabited village.

As I drove in I saw a sign propped up against a tree with a huge eye in vibrant colors that read, “Slow down, you move too fast.” I found it a great metaphor for the way someone would likely live in Earthaven: slowly, happily and deliberately, with a lot of care for his or her surroundings. A woman of athletic build in her 20s, greeted me at the entrance to the village with a smile. It was a crisp spring day in mid March and the tulips were already blooming. We walked up to the first part of the village and passed a daffodil. Karen laughed and said with a knowing smirk, “Guerrilla gardening. It’s when someone covertly plants a flower in a strange spot. Sort of like

sneaky gardening.”

We walked up the path to the first set of houses called Gateway Farm. Both houses were facing south and had large windows and a stucco shell. They overlooked a good sized, impossibly green meadow with a flock of fluffy sheep and a big dog that was very protective of her flock. Over the dog’s barreling barks Karen explained that these houses are the only ones that are propane free in Earthaven. “They have a very nice woodstove that they do all their cooking on.” I turned around and asked, “Is all of Earthaven completely energy independent?” She nodded with a proud smile. “Yes, we use solar and hydroelectric power. We do have Internet connections through a DSL connection though, and trust me, we love our DSL.” This made me think harder about

the lives that are lived here. They are not hiding from the outside world. If all of these people are as intelligent as claimed, of course they would want access to the biggest library in the world, the Internet, right here in the wooded village.

We continued on the tour through a dark, lush forest into sun.. "We use spaces that are not fields and full of sun to do some of our gardening. We like to emulate the way the Native Americans in the area used to grow food." I could see patches of herbs popping up with little markers beside them, labeled thyme, rosemary, mint, etc..

At Earthaven there is no general store, so neighbors share. This, as Karen explained, is how they stay in contact. "If there is only one place for me to get everything I need, I'm missing out on the lives of the people that supply me the things I use." I commented on how most people communicate through the web and text messages. She nodded, saying, "Yes it can get lonely, but one thing I am not is lonely here." She went on to say that she likes the idea of going to someone's home for eggs and catching up on his or her life for a little while. I pointed out that there must be a lot of fit people in the village if everyone walks. She lifted her chin, displaying her long, slender neck and smiled to the sky, "Yes, when people come to live here, they either gain weight if they are too thin or lose it if they are too heavy. They settle to their best body weight."

"How many people live here?" I asked. "It stays at around 60, but in the summer we get a lot of visitors. We do internships, apprenticeships, and people come to our campground and take some classes on permaculture." We were approaching the campground as she was saying this. It was high up on a hill with two tiny wooden buildings, a pump house for the well and a tool shed for the nearby orchard and a camp kitchen under a tarp roof.. Karen said that most of the water comes from springs that dot the 320 acres of Earthaven land. Earthaven will be expecting a lot of visitors in May and June for its Visitor Week, Wise Woman's Herbal Workshop, Survival Skills Weekend, and the Permaculture Fundamentals Course.

Moving along, we came to a large mound of cardboard and wood next to another emerald-green pasture called Persimmon Grove. Karen explained that they value the carbon retained in compost immensely and use this space as a compost dump so that cardboard, for example, will decompose into soil and prevent erosion. "It's not a trash dump, its part of our concept." I commented on how green all of the grass seemed to be and wondered if it had to do with the cardboard. She told me that no cardboard had been used in the field, but it was so green because the farmers use Biodynamic farming methods and chickens I gave her a confused look, and she explained. "The farmers that lease this field will move a flock chickens across in the field in moveable pens so the chickens can eat bugs and provide nitrogen from their manure. They also raise pigs further up the slope where there are more trees and bushes for shade. And they spray Biodynamic preparations on the grass to make it healthier – that's why it's so green.

We passed by several different hamlets where there



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were small houses huddled together. They were built on terraces, some very high up and others closer to the dirt path we were walking. Many of the houses were still under construction, and every one of them had solar panels. Each house we passed was facing south to collect the most sun all day, providing passive heat for evening.

A family of four with a baby on the mother's hip waved at us through their window as we passed. There were very few cars in the village and those were tucked into a hidden parking lot. The houses are purposefully small cottages, and people build with money they have rather than be indebted to banks, and so the homes can efficiently be heated. Some of the larger buildings housed several different families, who also share a kitchen. Karen pointed to a community kitchen where people cooked their food together. There is something about sharing the fruits of

your labor, literally, with your neighbors that seems so alien to me. But why? What is so wrong with breaking bread with your closest neighbors?

I asked about the government of Earthaven. "Is there, like a two-party system or something?" She laughed and said no. There are rules, however. There is a fee to become a member and a 99-year land lease that must be paid. All of the decisions are made at the Council Hall which is a beautiful circular building with a yurt-like wooden roof. Karen explained that decisions must be unanimous, and, yes, one person has the power to block a proposal if he or she chooses, but that rarely happens. "I actually really like that I have the power to make that choice if I know I am really not comfortable with something." I had to ask: "Are there some strong personalities in the village?" She nodded and said: "Diversity is a wonderful thing. We

have lots of people who have different ideas on how to do things. I really enjoy learning from everyone."

We walked passed a soccer field on the way to the hydroelectric station, which looked like no more than a little wooden hut off to the side of the path. Behind it was one of the three rushing creeks that lace the property. Karen lifted the heavy wooden lid on the hydro power unit and I could see how it worked. A small amount of flowing stream water gushed through pipes spinning an electric turbine. The turbine was connected to a system of batteries, which charged indefinitely, supplying electricity to several of the homes and businesses. The water then continued back to the creek bed. It was simple, yet ingenious.

My tour was heading to a close as we ambled back to my car. I noticed things I hadn't seen earlier, like artist-created designs on the walls of the buildings. A bamboo Peace Garden on the left came into view with small stone benches and brass bells left out for the next meditation. A babbling brook made the perfect backdrop for a peaceful moment. I was overwhelmed with all the beauty and care that had been put into this place. Incidentally, the creeks converge here into a beautiful swimming hole where they built a sauna to enjoy after a cool dip.

We approached my car and said our goodbyes. I thanked Karen for her time and information. As I watched her head for her home, I felt cleaner on that dirt path than I had ever been. I was free of the city smells, fumes, chemicals and noise of my own hometown. The colorful sign I had seen when I came in to the village flashed back into my head, and I had to smile. "Slow down, you move too fast." A philosophy we could all learn to live by. I got into my car and slowly made my way out of the little village knowing with certainty that I will return someday to learn much, much more.

For more info on Earthaven, visit Earthaven.org. The classes and workshops, as well as the visitors' week, will fill up fast, so it is imperative that you make your appointments early.

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