Why Americans are moving to the Cotswolds

US expats are flocking to the bucolic area for picture-postcard living — helipads, hulking fridges and Hershey's bars have followed, writes Melissa York

Urbanites are fleeing cities and Americans have long enjoyed a love affair with the Cotswolds

Melissa York | Sunday July 04 2021, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

It's Friday afternoon in Soho Farmhouse and an American accent rends the rarefied air in this quiet part of the world to ask, "Do you do pizza here?" The ducks and the Brits instinctively turn their heads. It's coming from a woman perching a glass of bubbly on the edge of the heated pool.

"At a certain time in the evening the sound of American accents is pretty loud around here," says Harry Gladwin, a partner at the Buying Solution. His agency sells mostly unlisted property to high-end buyers and he tells me that at present he has three Americans on his books looking for a pretty place near by.

"We had one set of clients straight off a plane who moved their entire life to the Cotswolds with no real draw to the area other than that they felt it was a gorgeous place to live," he adds. "With remote working becoming the norm, a cottage with land near Chipping Norton was the ultimate change of lifestyle from a busy New York."

Expats Jesse and Andrew D'Ambrosi opened D'Ambrosi Fine Foods in January last year

All over the world urbanites have turned their out-of-office on for the foreseeable future and have fled cities. Americans have long enjoyed a love affair with the Cotswolds and, although travel restrictions have got in the way, some have managed to make the move. Ironically, this Independence Day they will be celebrating their new-found freedom in a chocolate box village in the British countryside.

Many of them will be driving into Stow-on-the-Wold to pick up barbecue pork ribs, brisket sliders and "good ol' American slaw" at D'Ambrosi Fine Foods, a gourmet takeaway deli opened by expat couple Jesse and Andrew D'Ambrosi in January last year.

"We actually had no idea before moving here the number of American expats in this area. It's rather unbelievable," Jesse, 39, says. She met her husband, who is a chef, while they were working in New York and took him back to Europe with her. They lived in Paris and Amsterdam before settling down in a farmhouse on the outskirts of Stow in August 2019. They now have a three-year-old daughter called Rose.

"It reminds me a lot of where I grew up outside of Boston and we wanted Rose to have that country life that I had, where she could see eggs hatch, play outside, go see the lambing and all of these special things you don't get in a city," Jesse says.

Many Americans will be celebrating Independence Day in a chocolate-box village such as Fairford in Gloucestershire
ALAMY

London weekenders looking for a taste of the cosmopolitan in the country would soon tell their American friends that they found pastrami in a deli in Stow. It's been “a magnet” ever since. “Thanksgiving was a really big deal last year so that’s when we started to get more American products in,” Andrew, 44, says. Now they fly the Stars and Stripes outside and stock everything from Hershey’s Twizzlers to Triscuit crackers. “There is really nowhere else to get these things.”

The D’Ambrosis hope to buy but they may have to wait for the fevered local property market to settle down first. “I want to cry about it; it’s a nightmare. The prices are absolutely exorbitant,” Jesse says.

Property values have soared in the Cotswolds and surrounding countryside since the market reopened in May 2020, particularly at the higher end, where Gladwin says houses that used to be £10 million “are now more like £20 million”. Last year he knew of a large manor house in Barrington that was being rented for £10,000 a month; this year he knows of a three-bedroom converted barn all the way out in Shipston-on-Stour in south Warwickshire that’s renting for £12,000 a month.

This has brought a new level of affluence to the Cotswolds that is reflected in the skies. Helicopters are frequently seen flying overhead and there’s healthy demand for homes with helipads.

The American set in Notting Hill are particularly fond of the commute from Kingham; you can visit the farm shop at Daylesford and be at Daylesford’s outpost in Westbourne Grove an hour and a half later.

This flashier breed of buyer wants to be in a fashionable village around Soho Farmhouse where they can spot the Beckhams and the Jaggers (eek!) in places such as Great Tew, Churchill, Chadlington and Charlbury.

In recent years the offering in the Cotswolds has risen to meet the tastes of its increasingly affluent residents; Thyme, a hotel and spa in Lechlade, is a popular hangout spot; and D'Ambrosi Fine Foods isn't the only business catering to American tastes in the Cotswolds.

"While the Cotswolds have long been popular with Americans, the advancement of the quality offering in terms of good restaurants, pubs, farm shops, delis and private member clubs like Soho Farmhouse have taken the area to another level in their eyes. They have made the environment even more conducive to American tastes," says Charlie Wells, the managing director at the buying agency Prime Purchase.

Last week locals flocked to the opening of Pit Kitchen, an open-fire, alfresco dining spot strewn with fairy lights in the grounds of Cornwell Manor, outside Chipping Norton. Its menu is "inspired by Hackney's rich Middle Eastern heritage with a modern Cotswolds twist". It will "definitely be a magnet for all the local Americans", says one resident in the nearby village of Churchill.

Another highly anticipated arrival is Restoration Hardware, the upmarket American home-furnishings company, which will open its first stores outside the USA in west London and, you guessed it, the Cotswolds.

In his latest earnings letter its chairman and CEO Gary Friedman said its new store would open in spring 2022 at the Gallery in Aynhoe Park, a historic 73-acre estate designed in 1615 by Sir John Soane that overlooks the Cherwell Valley in Aynho. An architectural library, organic garden and a champagne and caviar cellar are promised, "among other unique experiences". But how will its buyers fit their enormous American fridges in a tiny stone cottage?

"Some clients from the USA in particular are keen to build their own homes rather than take on an older building, to ensure they can get the type of 'out of town' footprint they're used to," Gladwin says. "This, however, comes with a slight hazard warning in the Cotswolds as planning for a single dwelling is ever harder to secure."

Bliss Tweed Mill, Chipping Norton
ALAMY

That could be why so many Americans are attracted to the Lakes by Yoo, an 850-acre managed estate in Lechlade set around ten man-made lakes, where they can buy huge modern houses ready-made — the new two-bedroom "cabins" are on sale from £1.1 million — or purchase a plot and build it themselves with the help of an estate architect.

John Hitchcox, the founder of the property company Yoo, jokingly calls it a "polished ghetto" and compares it to the Hamptons in New York. "Most of the Americans that come to live here are successful, ambitious — well, they're all ambitious — and they put in a lot more hours than us Brits." When they look for a holiday home, he explains, they're not looking for a project — they're looking for something that's finished so they can spend as little of their two-week annual leave travelling to it and working on it as possible. "What they are buying into here is an easy country life," he says.

For Americans working in London there's no summer camp to send the kids to during the school holidays, and the safety of the private estate is one reason Manuela Hamilford, a New Yorker who owns the interiors company Hamilford Design, loves living there with her British husband and two sons. She bought on the biggest lake 12 years ago and says her boys love all the activities on offer, from bushcraft to zip lining. They even paddleboard over to their friends' houses.

Daylesford farm shop
ALAMY

Hamilford held a traditional clambake for the Fourth of July last year but she says Halloween is when everyone really gets into the holiday spirit. Amazon packages stuffed with decorations start to arrive weeks beforehand and residents are even getting competitive about Christmas lights. "I think the Americans drove it but the Brits jumped on board," Hamilford says.

Word has got around and she has been asked to design interiors for many of her compatriots in the area. "They want the big American kitchens where they can have a huge refrigerator and ten people milling about. It's all about entertaining here so they want open-plan spaces that open out on to a pool or a lake," she says.

Everyone wants a cinema room with plush armchairs and top-of-the-range surround sound; billiard rooms are popular and air conditioning and walk-in wardrobes are must-haves in the bedrooms.

While they go for the preppy blue-and-white coastal look popularised by Ralph Lauren in the Hamptons, Americans embrace plaids, tartan, cosy jute fabrics and fireplaces — "but, like, 4m-wide ones" — when they are here. "Everything is supersize," she says — particularly in the kitchen, where huge sinks, rubbish chutes and ice freezers are considered essential.

They may want to change their homes in the Cotswolds, Hamilford insists, but they don't want to change the essential character of the Cotswolds.

"We detox in London because the pub food is so great here," she says. "It's all comfort food too, not tiny portions of ceviche with an orchid on top. If you want someone to come in and cook for you, it's a fraction of the price here."

Charmed by its picture-postcard villages, the history, the smoke spiralling out of chimneys and its green and pleasant land, the American love affair with the Cotswolds looks as though it is more than just a summer fling.