

Rich pickings for stressed-out workers

An honest day's toil on the farm is helping people to recharge their batteries on holiday, reports **Andrew Ellison**

Most holidays involve lounging around a pool sipping cocktails, not days of back-breaking labour in the fields. But growing numbers of stressed-out city workers are choosing to spend their time off picking fruit at harvest time.

In an effort to end their reliance on overseas workers, vineyards are marketing "working holidays" where people can "reconnect with the countryside" and enjoy the "camaraderie" of farm life.

Rathfinny, the East Sussex wine estate, offers anyone the chance to stay in its luxurious, refitted barns and provides food for the duration of the "holiday". Workers/holidaymakers are paid £8 an hour with board and lodging of £23 a day deducted from their wages. The estate also offers a "bus to the pub at the end of the night".

Mark Driver, the co-founder of Rathfinny, said: "The way talks are going with the EU we may not be able to rely on getting seasonal labour from Europe in the future. We need about 70 people a day this year to help pick our grapes and we hope to get most of them locally, but we also welcome people from further afield to come and stay at the Flint Barns for harvest. That's why we built them in the first place."

He says the work is "hard but fun" and that everyone is required to spend all day in the fields come rain or shine. "There is a lot of banter and a lot of camaraderie. If you work behind a desk all day then I think picking grapes as a contrast is very therapeutic. People simply enjoy being outside and working."

The Tinwood estate near Chichester is going a step further, offering "harvest experience" day trips and charging £45 for the privilege. The day-out involves picking chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier grapes with a break for a "three-course rustic harvest lunch". After working "among the vines" customers get the chance to sample the estate's three different sparkling wines.

The Broadwater Farm in Kent has also seen a doubling of the number of British workers helping out in the apple harvest. The farm pays the national living wage and offers subsidised accommodation, including double rooms,



Vikki O'Hagan enjoys the fruits of her labour at Rathfinny Estate in East Sussex, where labourers are put up in luxury barns



to a team of 60 fruit pickers who gather nearly 3,000 tonnes of gala, jazz, bramley and braeburn apples in August and September.

The vineyards and farms are following in the footsteps of the National Trust, which offers 170 "working holidays" a year to help with conservation



work. Eilidh Robertson, 23, a recent graduate of Edinburgh University, spent two weeks last year grape picking and plans on doing the same this year. She describes the work as "rewarding", "social" and a "refreshing break from normal life".

She said: "It's hard work but you get

to meet people from all different backgrounds and all different age groups. It is great to spend so much time outdoors and the countryside is stunning. At the time, I was spending most of my life in a library at a desk on long-term projects, so to get outside and do physical work was a great

Light relief for heavy hearts

Rage cage

A padded room where you are given a sledgehammer and offered the chance to destroy objects such as old printers and unwanted china.

Colouring books

Filling in intricate patterns and designs is credited with soothing anxiety.

Playtime

Almost one in five building sets and action figures are bought by adults to help them to unwind.

Forest bathing

Walking through a wood while in a meditative state is said to help to reduce hostility, depression and stress.

Afternoon naps

Communities that still practise siestas are reported to live longer and suffer less stress and disease.

Capoeira

The stress-busting Brazilian martial arts dance was developed by slaves who were not allowed to fight with weapons.

break. It gives you an amazing sense of satisfaction.

"You do a lot of walking and carrying of baskets of grapes so by the end of the week you are quite fit and you sleep like a log. In the evenings, we would walk to the pub or play board games in the lounge which was great fun. Overall, the work was hard on the back but good for the soul."

Ms Robertson was joined by Vikki O'Hagan, 25, a digital marketing manager from London, and about two dozen other professionals who had chosen working holidays on the Rathfinny estate rather than lazy days at the beach or sightseeing in the city.

Mr Driver says that although Brexit may make it harder to recruit cheap labour, the split from the European Union will ultimately be good for the English wine industry. He said: "Overall leaving the EU is positive for us because the UK imports 99 per cent of all wine. If it was a French winemaker I'd be worried that if tariffs were applied the UK might find new and better suppliers from the New World. These are exciting times for the English sparkling wine industry. Continental Europe was never going to be a major market for us as they make quite a lot of wine over there."

Leading article, page 29

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