

LOVE IN A BOGGY CLIMATE

A couple who built a healing eco paradise on an Irish bog are now looking for new custodians – compost loo included! By *Hugh Graham*

When Georg and Bettina Peterseil bought a 25-acre property in Co Mayo in 1984, they were spiritually broken. Bettina, who was born in Hamburg at the end of the Second World War, grew up ashamed of being German, surrounded by a sense of guilt and melancholia. Georg, a Viennese architect, was trying to recover from a traumatic and abusive childhood and a divorce. They met in 1979, and when Bettina inherited some money they decided to make a fresh start. “We felt very separated from the earth and from other people,” Georg says on a Zoom call from Ireland. “We were on a healing journey. We wanted to find a place in the wilderness and heal that disconnection.” They could not find that special feeling in the Alps so decided to up sticks for a bleak bog in the West Country of Ireland after seeing a property ad in a German newspaper. They have spent the past 38 years reviving the barren landscape – and their psyches. Now in their seventies, they are thinking of selling. If you long to escape the turmoil of the world, the bog may be your salvation. They are the quiet stars of the 16th series of Ben Fogle’s *New Lives in the Wild*. The golden-haired TV presenter estimates he has met 100 castaways living in remote places, but believes this story of a couple who fell in love, created an eco paradise and healed their pain in the most unlikely of places, an Irish bog, is his best yet. “A bog is synonymous with a dark and oppressive place,” Fogle says. “Most people try to get away from bogs. That is why Georg and Bettina could secure that land. No one else wanted it. But the before-and-after pictures are astonishing. It shows the power of man – and woman – to turn an inhospitable place into a thriving and beautiful habitat of wildlife and colour. It is a



place of great healing and happiness. Georg and Bettina are a very spiritual couple. They believe in serendipity and destiny. I stayed for a week and came away feeling uplifted.” Fogle thinks more will live like them in the future as people start taking a personal responsibility for climate change and nurturing their mental health. In 1984, when the couple viewed the property, there were no trees, no road and no infrastructure. So why did they buy it? “I went up a hill above the lake and saw a flash of light,” Georg recalls. “I had this feeling that we had found the place we were looking for.” After they arrived, however, they sorely missed seeing trees, so have since planted 3,000 (one fifth of the land is arable). “Trees are a symbol of home,” Georg says. They lived in a caravan for two years before they started building their house, three years without electricity, four without water and five without a telephone. They got by on gas stoves and candlelight, using a local well, harvesting rainwater and bathing (naked) in the lake. All the while home schooling two children. “It was a very creative time,” Georg says. “I loved having no electricity,” Bettina adds. “Instead of smartphones and TV, we read a lot of books. We had to create our own life within.” They do have electricity today in their four-bedroom house, which was designed by Georg to have an “organic shape” to blend with the landscape. Three wood stoves provide heating, backed up by an electric storage heater for very cold days. They grow much of their own food – potatoes, kale, carrots and Brussels sprouts do well here – and use a compost loo, clearing the waste with a shovel every two months. It fills four wheelbarrows and takes 20 minutes. “It’s not as unpleasant as it might sound,” Bettina says. “We use it to fertilise the garden. It symbolises working with nature, transforming it into something useful.” When they arrived not even dandelions grew here, so Bettina picked “bright stuff from the side of the road”, replanted the wildflowers, and nature added more colour to the mix. “Bettina’s flowers are her spiritual food,” Georg says. The peat also brings her peace. “The bog gives me shelter,” says Bettina, who walks on it barefoot. “It sucks me in, takes me deeper into myself. It has a healing quality. When I lie on the heather I feel happy. Bogs are also rich in carbon.” Yet living the wild life isn’t easy now that they are in their seventies – they spend most of their time cutting branches and chopping wood to keep the stoves going. Georg says it keeps him in shape, but he’d like time to write a book (Bettina is also a writer). So they are contemplating selling, but not to just anybody – they are looking for a “custodian”. It won’t be their children because they have settled in Germany. “We are at a stage in our life when it would be good to step back,” Bettina says. “Our question is, how could this natural paradise now best serve other people? Who do we pass the baton to so they can continue our journey? It could be a charity, it could be a trust, it could be a person.” Don’t expect a traditional property transaction. They have not mentioned a price. “We have to grow with the idea,” Bettina says. “It’s a process the other person has to be willing to enter. It’s about figuring it out and trusting.” “It can go fast, it can go slow; we are open,” Georg says. The Peterseils haven’t the foggiest idea where they will move to. They might even stay on if someone else wants to work the land. “We don’t have a plan. Since the two of us met, our life has worked best when we moved into the unknown.”

Ben Fogle: New Lives in the Wild is on Channel 5 at 9pm on Tuesdays. Georg and Bettina feature in this week’s episode. If you are interested in becoming the next custodian of the bog, send an email to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk

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