

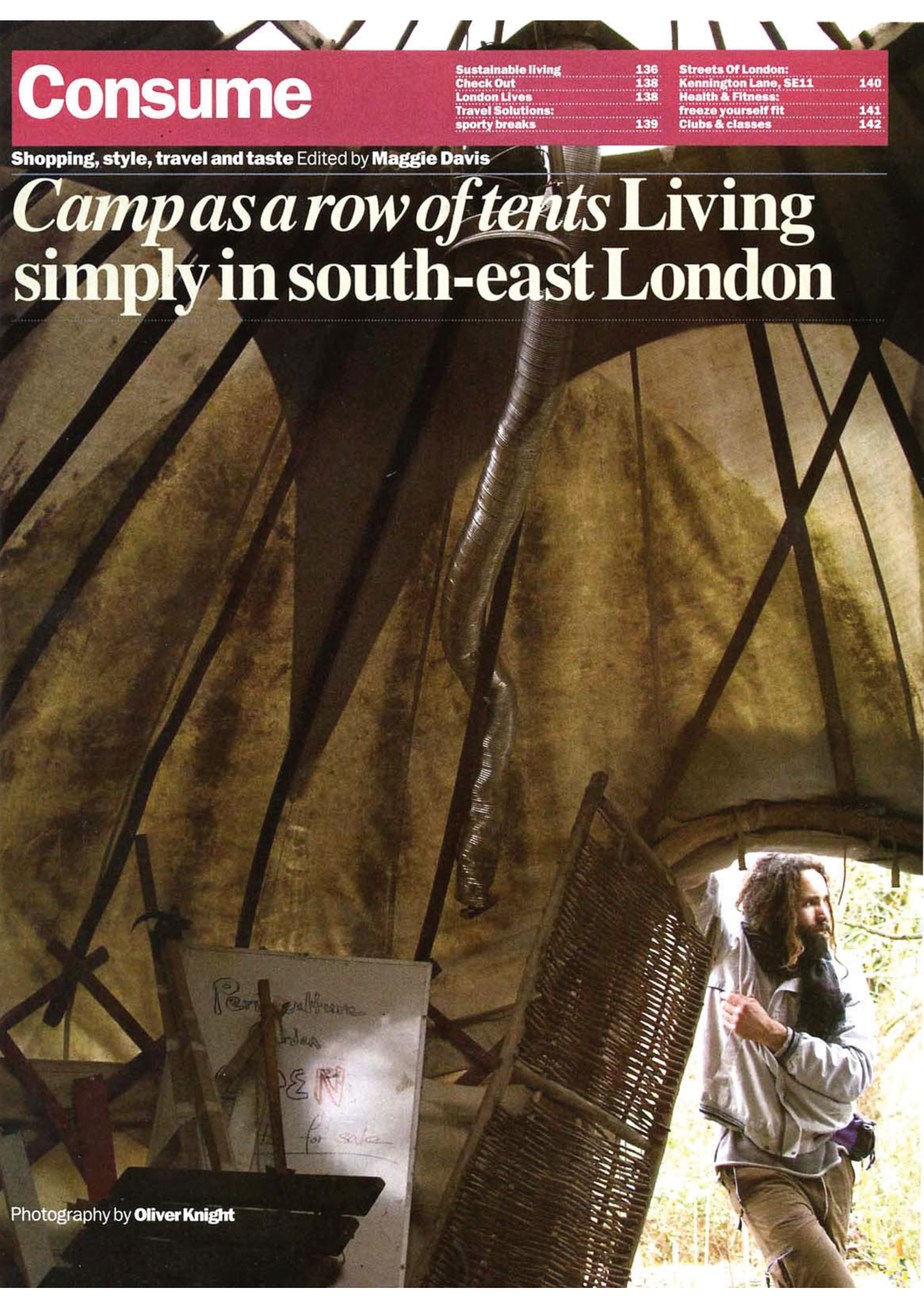
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Shopping, style, travel and taste Edited by Maggie Davis

Camp as a row of tents Living simply in south-east London



Photography by **Oliver Knight**

Back to basics



Merlyn Peter and his fellow waissailers on the One Tree Hill Allotment

Tree amigos

Jessica Ferguson finds a small community living the sustainable life in a wood in south London. Photography **Oliver Knight**

It's a Saturday afternoon in south London and in the One Tree Hill Allotment, a jolly group in a rainbow of anoraks and jumpers are gathered round a hole in the ground in which a man with dreadlocks is planting an apple tree. Around him children let off streamers and a man bangs a tambourine with gusto. Homemade cider is being handed out liberally and there is a Tupperware box of apple biscuits. We're wassailing; taking part in a traditional celebration of apples that dates back to medieval times.

'It's like leaving the city for a day,' one man tells me excitedly, as he nearly slides down the muddy hill. 'We're a very committed lot here; at Guy Fawkes' there was

a bonfire, a big barbecue and candles. There was even a small contingent up here on Christmas Day.'

I feel like I've stumbled across an impromptu party. 'It's a place where people want to be,' the tambourine player says proudly and you can see why; the atmosphere here is friendly, unpretentious and inclusive. And the view is immense: south London spreads out beneath us in a misty mass of rooftops; railtrack, concrete cubes, lawns and leafless spindly trees.

So who are these people and what are they doing? The 'leader' of this eclectic group is an enigmatic figure called Merlyn Peter, 38. Quiet and reserved, he is dreadlocked, swarthy, and dressed in robust hiking trainers. Over the past four years he has built up a group of volunteers and supporters to whom he gives courses on the principles of permaculture, a philosophy and a practice of sustainable living based on living respectfully in response to the land. It is also about

sharing goods and skills, and living in as indigenous a way as possible. Or as Merlyn likes to put it, 'Maximum contemplation, minimum action'.

The group tackles everything from tree grafting to eco-building and orchard design. So far they've built a small cluster of wooden shelters, a cob oven, an apple press, a spinning wheel and a yurt. They don't actually live on-site, but they grow their own veg on an allotment plot, gather blackberries from the woods and dig

clay from the soil to fashion into plates and pots. There's a children's allotment and a sideline in guerrilla gardening.

It's a mixed group and anyone's welcome. The majority are, predictably, squatters, travellers and hippies, but there are also single mums, families, students and young professionals (most recently a commercial diver who worked on the last James Bond film). Each monthly course brings with it more people bringing new skills – photography, project management or bread baking for example.

The group's lifestyle choices aren't strictly about sticking two fingers up at capitalism. There seems to be an understanding of London's capitalist consumer culture and what creates it. 'It's less greed than a kind of obsessiveness that is inherent in human nature,' says Merlyn. These people seem to be yearning for a simpler, more environmentally friendly and fulfilling way of life that respects nature. 'I want to make people think about the



Tools of the eco-trade

land. It's such an empowering process to be able to grow your own food and build your own house, and that's been lost in our culture.'

Merlyn got the idea for the group after he finished converting the garden of his Honor Oak council flat into a veritable orchard in 2001. From there he took over a shared strip of disused public wasteland between the railway embankment and his back fence, planting fruit and vegetables and building the first of his natural ovens. He felt he had something good that he wanted to share with the community: 'My vision was to extend out – in a very organic way – from my personal space to a community space.'

He started the Soteriological Garden (soteriological is a theological term relating to ideas of salvation) on the local allotment, teaching people to work with the land, to bake bread in a natural oven, to

'It's such an empowering process to be able to grow your own food and build your own house, and that's been lost in our culture'

brew their own cider and to build wooden structures. Volunteers came to him, anything up to 15 of them a day, and though many come sporadically he says you can tell who's dedicated – they turn out in bad weather. Eventually Merlyn wants to start his own permaculture school, but the shorter-term goal is to build a platform for the yurt and put in some under-floor heating. 'I've had volunteers there from 12 noon to ten at night. Give them food and a warm campfire and that's their basic needs met.'

Merlyn, who grew up in nearby New Cross, the son of a craftsman and a wool-shop owner, lets the soteriological philosophy infiltrate every aspect of his life. 'I try to avoid televisions and magazines,' he says, although he says he does like 'a bit of music on the radio when I'm cooking'. And he's certainly never heard of Jade Goody. He talks about 'people who just go home and switch on the screen... it's an incredible waste of time'. In his voice is less condescension than the vexed frustration of a parent who worries about their children choosing a flimsier, less interesting simulacrum of living over the real thing. So turn off your TV set and get down to SE23.

Get involved

A list of forthcoming courses can be found on the website below. Saturday March 10 is 'Fruit Tree Grafting' at the Devonshire Road Nature Reserve; March 17-18 is an 'Introduction to Permaculture' at the Devonshire Road Nature Reserve; and April 14-15 is 'Eco-building' at Honor Oak Park Allotments. Soteriological Garden (020 8699 3044/www.soteriologicgarden.net) Email know@soteriologicgarden.net for an application form.

One Tree Allotments is located in Honor Oak, SE23 (www.othas.org.uk); email vice chair Ian White on s_london_ari@btinternet.com Honor Oak rail.



Planting an apple tree



Inside the yurt



The natural oven



The tambourine man



One-bedroom yurt for rent in Honor Oak. Needs some work

How to live sustainably

Grow your own food

Follow *The Backyard Gardener's* guide to starting a vegetable garden, then learn what you can do with it. Plants for a Future has a database of around 7,000 useful fruits, vegetables, plants and flowers. If you don't have a garden, contact your local council or log on to londonallotments.net for vacant plots. www.backyardgardener.com www.pfaf.org www.londonallotments.net

Live in a Routemaster

Double Decker Living will adapt an old Routemaster for you, complete with solar-panelled roof and compost toilet. www.doubledeckerliving.com

Tour an eco-village

The Beddington Zero Energy Development (BedZED) in Wallington, Sutton, produces as much energy from renewable resources as it consumes. Take a tour to pick up some tips. www.peabody.org.uk/bedzed. Tours Wed & Thur, 2.20pm. Adm £22, £15 students. See www.bioregional.com.

Switch electricity company

Choose one that uses only renewable sources. Ecotricity invests more per customer in new sources of renewable energy than any other UK supplier. www.ecotricity.com

Join a car-sharing club

You'll save on tax, insurance and servicing while reducing pollution. www.citycarclub.co.uk

Share skills and equipment

Permaculture encourages people to support each other as a society – share equipment, offer a skill to friends at a reduced price or exchange skills. Got a house full of clutter? Give it to someone who could use it. www.gumtree.com/london – see the 'swap shop' and 'freebies' section. www.swapshop.co.uk www.TeamUpHere.com

Follow eco-friendly fashion

The charity TR Aid (Textile Recycling for Aid and International Development) sells donated clothes and customises them to create something new, unique and desirable. TR Aid, 61 Westbourne Grove, W2 (020 7221 2421/www.traid.org.uk) Royal Oak tube.

If you have a wardrobe of clothes that don't fit properly or look tatty, the Junky Wardrobe Surgery at Junky Styling can perform everything from an alteration to a complete redesign. The main shop sells its own line of avant-garde reconstructed fashion. Junky Styling, 12 Dray Walk, Old Truman Brewery, 91 Brick Lane, E2 (020 7247 1883) Liverpool St tube/rail.

And read all about it

'New Complete Self-Sufficiency' by John Seymour, Will Sutherland and EF Schumacher (£20 Dorling Kindersley). Additional research by Hannah Kane