



The freedom of renting

[TREND] More people in the UK are renting than ever before – but could a practice that’s traditionally seen as lacking in stability actually be making us more interesting? Eleanor Tucker explores how renting might be the hippest thing to do after all...

Last week, we had something of a small domestic emergency: the washing machine broke. I say small but it was actually a disaster – with two young children, the pile of dirty clothes in our household is something that needs to be addressed daily. So 48 hours into the crisis, which inconveniently occurred over a bank holiday weekend, there was already a backlog of laundry that could potentially be spotted from space.

But did we frantically search for YouTube tutorials on how to fix it? Did we call out a plumber, for an extortionate fee? Did we spend our bank holiday wandering the aisles of an electrical superstore in an out-of-town retail park? We did not. Because our flat isn't

technically ours – it's rented. And if something goes wrong, we call the letting agent, and they come and sort it, usually straight away.

The ease with which this minor crisis was averted got me thinking. On that long weekend we all went to the beach, not Currys. And as well as no white goods to purchase, there were no shelves to put up, no tiles to grout, and no fences to creosote – because all these things are done for us. And as it was a gorgeous sunny day, this made me feel a little bit liberated, quite bohemian – and very, very happy.

Home-obsessed?

For years, British people have been obsessed with home ownership –

much more so than our European and American neighbours. The phrase 'an Englishman's home is his castle' couldn't be more true, and it extends beyond English shores. Drive down any street at the weekend and we are all fortifying our castles with MDF, Weathershield Exterior Gloss and driveways full of gravel. Walk into your local newsagent and the homes magazines take up entire rows. Switch on the television at any given moment, and there will be a property show on – guaranteed. We are home-ownership obsessed. We talk about it, we watch it, we read about it. And at the weekends, we DIY it.

Compare this to Europe where, in many countries, renting is the norm >>>

RENT OR BUY?

According to ONS research, rents across all the English regions increased in the year to June 2014, with prices – unsurprisingly – rising most in London. For that same month, prices paid by first-time buyers were 12 per cent higher on average than in June 2013. So, whether you decide to rent or buy, there's lots to consider.

We asked property expert Sarah Beeny for the lowdown

'When you are renting, you're free to move at the drop of a hat, and also, you don't have to worry about the cost of maintaining the property,' Sarah Beeny explains.

'However, the obvious disadvantage is that you don't benefit from a rise in house prices, meaning planning for the future can be harder. Having less security of tenure can be difficult, even more so if you have a family – which is typically a stage in life at which we like to put down roots. And, of course, if you don't buy,

you will still be paying rent long after most of your contemporaries have paid off their mortgages.

'In the UK, legislation makes it tricky to be a family in private rented accommodation and feel secure.

'Abroad, landlords tend to remain landlords for decades, meaning you're less likely to be asked to leave your home because they have decided they want the property back for whatever reason. It's probably because of this that renting is viewed much more positively

abroad – prizing home-ownership is quite a British thing, but it's also a response to the rental market.

'In other countries, lenders to landlords are very keen on them getting longer-term tenants. This means that there are fewer landlords in it for the short term, which in turn leads to a better deal for their tenants.

'If you're a UK renter – enjoy the freedom, but make sure that you're putting aside some money each month too, so you have a nest egg in older age.'



“It's not just this practical freedom of renting that I love. It's the emotional freedom. We can put down roots, but we can dig them up again, too. We're not tied down”

>>> rather than the exception – and not looked down upon as some kind of inferior lifestyle choice. In Berlin, for example, 90 per cent of the properties are rented, while in Paris, fewer than one in three of the residents own their homes. And over in San Francisco, the renting population were the founders of the bohemian counter-culture that the Californian city is famous for – although in recent years, they have begun to be pushed out by wealthy, Silicon Valley buyers amid concerns that the city is 'losing its soul'.

But is the tide turning in the UK? Thanks to the financial crash, and the inflation of house prices, more and more young people are finding it hard to get on the housing ladder to begin with. And more and more families like

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mine who are already on the ladder (we let out the property that we own in another area), have been finding that they're stuck with a home they can't sell when they want to relocate.

The freedom of renting

Renting is a life of freedom. You can live in areas where you'd never be able to buy a place. And moving house is a

hundred times easier when you're not part of a chain. There are no worries about mortgage interest rates, negative equity or subsidence. If there's a problem, you just make a phone call. And as for that DIY work – who can afford it anyway? Have you seen the price of eggshell paint? I'd rather make like the Parisians and spend the money on lunch at the boulangerie on the way out to the park. I won't get a headache from the paint fumes, either.

It's not just this practical freedom I love. It's the emotional freedom, too. We can put down roots, but we can also dig them up again. We're not tied down: we're as free to decide when to up sticks as the mice in our slightly-rough-around-the-edges Victorian flat. And as for them – you guessed it – we

called the landlord when they showed up and he 'moved them on...'

Maybe I'm not a bonafide bohemian renter though, because we also own a property, even if we don't live in it. So I spoke to my friend Rachel Buchanan, who blogs at thelittlepip.com. She has never owned a home, and continues to choose not to.

'I've been a renter since I went to university 14 years ago', she explains. 'I've never even considered buying a house; to start with, I didn't think that I could afford it, but now I love the convenience of renting. I can't see my husband and I changing the situation any time soon, even though we have now acquired a toddler and a cat. It feels more European to rent, although they benefit from long-term leases and rent

control. I think there's too much pressure to get on the housing ladder here; renting is seen as a poor second option.

'People think that we must be doing it because we're not good enough with money to be able to buy somewhere, or that we don't care, or that we aren't committed to each other, whereas, actually, we just don't see property ownership as a status thing,' she continues. What could be more counter-culture than that?

The disadvantages

There are downsides to this way of life, though. Although my landlord will fix a broken washing machine or get rid of mice, he's unlikely to jump to it if I'm not that happy with the colour of my kitchen walls. And although we have

signed a lease, there's nothing to stop the owners of our flat deciding they want to sell it. And what about the future? What about a family home, a nest-egg for the future, somewhere to grow old? There are, as with most things, cons sitting alongside the pros.

But my recent foray into grown-up renting has made me realise that there isn't just one way to do this living somewhere thing. Maybe being a tenant rather than an owner isn't the stop-gap it's often considered to be. Maybe it's a state of mind; a rejection of the accepted way of doing things. An alternative lifestyle unhindered by the often-tedious practicalities of daily life, that frees your time and allows you to do the things you want. Isn't that what we're all after?