

A different approach to life

Twin Oaks welcomes visitors interested in seeing how the experiment in communal living is coming along

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Twin Oaks

Where: At the end of an obscure dirt road in Louisa. Follow Interstate 64 west to the exit for state Route 605 (Exit 148). Make a right onto Route 605 north and travel about five miles to the intersection with state Route 646/Yanceyville Road. Take a left and follow Yanceyville Road about one mile to state Route 697/Vigor Road. Take a left and go about 0.8 of a mile. Twin Oaks is located at the end of the second driveway on the left.

Phone: (540) 894-5126; call during regular business hours to sign up for a tour.

Hours: A three-hour tour is offered most Saturdays from March through October and most alternating Saturdays from November through February. The tour begins at 2 p.m.

Web site: www.twinoaks.org gives an excellent overview of the history, philosophy and income-generating products of this community.

Admission: A \$5 donation is requested. If your guide is as excellent as mine was, you're sure to get your money's worth and then some.

Overview: Founded in 1967 by several people influenced by B.F. Skinner's "Walden Two," which depicts a utopian community shaped by behaviorist ideology, Twin Oaks is an ongoing experiment in communal living. And for a measly five bucks, you can spend three hours under the wing of one of the residents, who will show you around the about 450-acre property and will answer your questions about how more than 90 people live and work together with minimal strife in an income-sharing, communal environment.

"We embrace values more important than behaviorism," explained Paxus, 47, my tour guide and a six-year resident of Twin Oaks. (Twin Oaks residents generally go by first names only.) "We're interested in egalitarianism. We don't reward or punish. We have a kind of joke that we can get people to do what you want by giving them cookies . . . and to not do certain things by gossiping about them."

That being said, the maintenance of the community depends heavily on a labor-credit system, under which most adults are required to put in 42 hours of work each week. Work here includes income-generating activities, such as helping make hammocks or tofu, as well as the kinds of domestic chores and parenting responsibilities for which most of us Monday-through-Friday slobs don't get nearly enough credit. Other labor-creditable activities include going to the doctor, voting and mediating conflicts among community members.

Not a bad deal, considering that in exchange for all these forms of labor, residents receive food, shelter, access to a communal clothing "shop," health care and ample opportunities to learn new skills in a relaxed environment. Plus, one of the cafeteria cooks ran a French restaurant for 10 years, so the food can't be all that bad. And if it pains you to imagine being trapped in this bucolic idyll for long periods, maybe it'll help to know that the community shares 17 vehicles, which can be reserved for ranging afield, and, although televisions are prohibited, several computers are wired for Internet access.

According to Paxus, hammock-making is the principal economic activity of Twin Oaks, accounting for more than 75 percent of the community's annual income. Although worker satisfaction is prized more than production volume - as reflected in Twin Oaks' unique H-shaped hammock-making jigs that accommodate two workers instead of the traditional one ("excellent for talking, bad for efficiency," said Paxus) - the community ranks as the third-largest hammock-maker in the United States. Tens of thousands of Twin Oaks hammocks go to Pier 1 Imports annually.

The tour gives ample opportunities to see the hammock business, but more time is spent exploring other nooks and crannies of the expansive property. You'll no doubt glimpse the residents doing what human beings everywhere do. We ran into people cleaning up the aftermath of a birthday celebration, making cheese, tending a garden and listening to opera while preparing dinner. Radical stuff, eh? As a visitor, you may experience the prickly sensation of otherness that comes from contact with a relatively closed community, but so it goes for us mainstreamers. By the end of the tour, after interrogating my guide off and on for three hours, I was still fascinated by the organization and dynamics of the community. And I was still wondering - could I ever abandon a life of information overload to make herbed tofu and relax for months on end in the countryside?

Don't miss: Taking your turn on one of the swings in an area nicknamed the Playground of Death and Rebirth, a wooded area filled with makeshift platforms, nets, swings and other contraptions. Don't let the rotting boards and uneven surfaces get the better of you. Cowabunga!

Extra time: It's possible to spend more time at Twin Oaks as an invited guest of one of the residents. Three-week visitorships are offered throughout the year for those with a real interest in joining the community.