

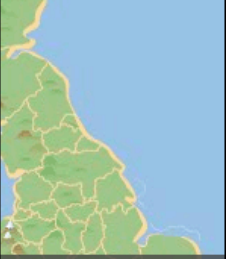


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How to go slow

Last Updated: 12:01am BST 26/07/2008

The world's fastest nations are also the fattest and the most stressed. As Britain prepares to mark its first 'Slow Sunday' tomorrow, Mark Palmer laments our obsession with speed

- [Born three weeks late and trying to catch up](#)

Hurry up! Now I don't know about you but that has a mighty familiar ring to it. My mother used to say it all the time, with a pause of one impatient second between the "hurry" and the "up" - and I've been slavish in following her directive ever since.

No one could ever accuse me of dilly-dallying. I've been tearing here and there for more than half a century - arriving at departure gates just before they close, slipping into theatres as the lights go down, meeting deadlines with seconds to spare, topping up penalty points on my licence (but keeping them just below the dreaded 12), rushing from one relationship to the next. In short, cramming more and more into less and less time while being far too busy to count the collateral damage.



In the slow lane and perfectly content

But something's happening. And it's something that's happening to a growing band of life's travellers, people of all backgrounds, all ages and all creeds. Fittingly, it's not a fast change but it's change none the less: a gradual but resolute shift away from the cult of speed in favour of the altogether more interesting world of slow.

"The evidence is there for all to see," says Dr Richard Layard, the Labour peer and author of Happiness: Lessons from a New Science. "You go faster and faster but never quite achieve what you hope to. The answer, of course, is to go slower. What that means is not laziness or sloth but mindfulness, doing things better. Happiness is about savouring your current experience rather than planning the next one, realising that the most important person in the world is the person in front of you right now, and you can't achieve that if you're in too much of a hurry."

That evidence is not just anecdotal. The Slow Food movement began in Italy in 1986 when Carlo Petrini, a foodie from Bra, near Turin, was shaken into action by the opening of a McDonald's at the foot of the Spanish Steps in Rome. Today, the organisation spans 130 countries, each with its own network of what it calls "convivia" (local Slow Food branches).

There are nearly 50 such branches in Britain. Some are immersed in promoting sustainable food production, others run Slow Food markets and promote agricultural biodiversity. All want to nurture the link between consumer and producer and transform Britain's eating habits into a slower, more fulfilling pastime.

"The world food crisis is making people think differently about what's on their plates. I don't hold with the idea that this is an elitist phenomenon," says Silvija Davidson, chair of Slow Food UK. "In fact, the right to pleasure is a leveller because it's shared by everyone. The point about slow is that it doesn't

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Skincare in the sun

_____ necessarily require radical change. By definition, it's gentle. You can do a little bit at whatever pace you want. Slow Food does not claim to have effected mass change, rather it's encouraging a change that is already happening. For example, processed food and ready-made meals are now generally regarded as socially naff and in time we will see that reflected in the supermarkets."

The high priest of the Slow movement is Carl Honoré, a Canadian-born former foreign correspondent based in London, whose book *In Praise of Slow* has been translated into 30 languages. Now, he travels the world speaking to corporations, students and local government organisations, while also overseeing the Slow Planet website ("building the global hub for the Slow revolution") and doing his best to maintain a balanced family life with his English wife and their two children. He's a busy boy.

"Slow is a state of mind. It's about finding a relaxed relationship with time. I don't wear a watch but I am never late any more," says Honoré, 40. "Slow is to do with shifting gears at the right moment and recognising that speed often just scratches at the surface. The Slow movement is as true for the pinstripe suits as it is the tie-dye T-shirts. Whereas 15 years ago the concept of slow was only interesting for a few people between heart attacks, a lot of the young are now standing back and saying, 'This is crazy, we've got to put on the brakes.?'"

Which isn't easy. There's almost a cultural taboo about slowing down before you have made it official by hanging a retired sign on your door. The danger is that you take seriously what Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, said about how we have moved from "a world in which the big eat the small to one in which the fast eat the slow".

And yet the science doesn't bear this out. Arguably, the fastest nations in the world - America and Britain - are also the fattest; communication gets faster and faster but the stress involved when that broadband connection goes down can become unbearable; we complain that there isn't enough time in the day so we speed up so much that the slightest setback or delay can provoke vein-popping fury in otherwise level-headed people.

"Speed has become an addiction, a kind of idolatry," says Honoré, who actually loves speed on the right occasion (he's a keen squash and ice-hockey player). "Even when speed starts to backfire, we invoke the go-faster gospel. Falling behind at work? Get a quicker internet connection. No time for that novel you were given at Christmas? Learn to speed-read. Diet not working? Try liposuction. Too busy to cook? Buy a microwave. Can't find a boyfriend or girlfriend? Try speed-dating."

Cittaslow is an independently run offshoot of Slow Food. In 2003 Ludlow in Shropshire became the first town to sign up in this country (Bra was the first Cittaslow worldwide) and there are now eight Cittaslows in Britain, with two more (Lampeter, in Wales, and Sturminster Newton, in Devon) due to join soon. Each Cittaslow develops its own strategy after agreeing to some 60 principles, which range from a commitment to plant flowers in the high street to recycling and improving air quality.

"We found in Ludlow that it joined various tiers of government in ways that had not happened before," says Graeme Kidd, president of Cittaslow UK and a former mayor of Ludlow. "When you look at it there aren't really things you can fall out over but there is a lot of common ground. One of our goals was to treat visitors and tourists in the same way that we treated locals: giving them time, not rushing them and not looking at them as walking wallets."

The principles of slow are now informing the debate on design and architecture, parenting, travel, exercise, work, sex, health and, of course, food. As Carlo Petrini, author of *Slow Food Nation*, puts it: "Being Slow means that you control the rhythms of your own life. You decide how fast you have to go in any given context. If today I want to go fast, I go fast; if tomorrow I want to go slow, I go slow. What we are fighting for is the right to determine our own tempo."

The Resurgence Trust, founded by Satish Kumar more than 30 years ago, believes that finding the right tempo requires a collective effort and some sort of bold initiative. To this end, his organisation, which publishes the influential ecology magazine *Resurgence*, is introducing its first Slow Sunday tomorrow, when people will be encouraged not to drive or shop, use the internet, watch television or play video games.

"Fast is connected with quantity and slow is connected to quality," says Kumar, a former Jain monk and follower of Mahatma Gandhi who came to Britain from India in the Sixties. "By going slow you might achieve less but you will achieve better. So much of modern life is about getting the job done rather than doing the job well. And doing something well is so much more satisfying. Waiting is a good quality. When the cabinet meets, it should start with five minutes of silence - if the meeting began in a reflective mood, the deliberations would be of a far higher quality."

Alastair Sawday, author of the celebrated guidebooks that bear his name, is another Slow stalwart. After publishing *Go Slow England* earlier this year, he is planning a *Go Slow Italy* followed by *Go Slow Britain*. "It's really a celebration of people doing things with integrity and what I like about the Slow movement is that it frames the environmental message in a positive way. It resists the homogenisation of food and culture, and longs for the return to a sense of place."

And if slowing down means eating better, learning better, exercising better, reading better,

caring better and having better sex, then the small matter of a happier society could be one of the spin-offs. In time, of course.

"I used to see empty space in my diary and panic," says Honoré. "Now I deliberately keep whole weeks free apart from urgent work stuff. I unplug a lot and I say "no" all the time. That's a terrifying thing to do because you think you're missing out but in fact the door doesn't close when you say no. In many ways it opens wider. I like to think it's all about getting in touch with your inner tortoise."

- For details of Slow Sunday, see www.resurgence.org.

How to go slow

- Unplug all gadgets so you can recharge your own batteries
- Work less
- Experiment with not wearing a watch
- Eat meals at a table
- Read a story to a loved-one or friend
- Take up a hobby
- Check your personal speedometer
- Leave gaps in your diary
- Walk more
- Sit still for 10 minutes a day
- Take up pilates
- Bake bread
- Run baths rather than showers
- Visit official Slow Cities
- Arrive 10 minutes early for meetings and appointments
- Read poetry
- Join a choir
- Learn a musical instrument
- Grow your own vegetables
- Stop smoking
- Be kind

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