

## Back in the food chain

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A 3ft long wood axe leans casually against a wall, next to the television and a pile of DVDs.

A blowpipe, some darts still tipped with poison, a bow and arrow and crudely decorated pelts of animals hang from the wood-panelled walls of the elegant Georgian room.

A horned skull peers from the top of some shelves and there are willow-woven fish and eel traps.

Ben McNutt sits four-square on a small stool in the middle of the room, explaining what it's like to eat fox, magpie, puff adder ... and why grey squirrel tastes better than rabbit (more later).



Well over 6ft tall and almost as broad, he looks as though he could cope with any hardship, from the dense jungle to untamed Botchergate...

He talks of meeting jaguars in Belize, hacking through the jungles of South East Asia and living with Bushmen in the unforgiving desert of Namibia.

"A good definition of wilderness is when you are back in the food chain. That is when you are most alive," grins Ben.

He's a survival expert, a master of 'bushcraft' and regularly leads groups (or 'tribes') of desk-bound office workers off into the wilds of the Lake District for up to a week at a time.

Sometimes with just a knife, a pot, some fish hooks, a length of fishing line and the clothes on their backs. The idea is to make your own shelter, spark your own fire and find your own food and water.

But Ben stresses that the trips are definitely not for Rambo wannabes or SAS hopefuls.

Nor are they designed to be team-bonding exercises for human resource officers looking for a weekend break from Peterborough.

He said: "Our courses are not 'hard core' military survival courses, but they are not ordinary holidays. We only want people who want to learn.

"A large part of our customer base is Home Counties IT professionals who want to do something completely different.

"We get a large proportion of doctors and nurses and gap year students who are going to do a conservation project.

"A real growth area is those who have taken early retirement – people in their 50s and 60s.

"The minimum age limit we have is 18, but there is no upper limit and we have a couple in their 70s booked in this year.

“The older people tend to go in for botanical study trips.”

Ben set up Cocker-mouth-based bushcraft and wilderness survival outfit Woodsmoke with his partner Lisa Fenton.

His love of the outdoors grew from a childhood in windswept and wild Donegal, in north west Ireland, where he would help his parents grow and gather food from fields, woods and beaches near their home.

Ben and Lisa, both 32, met in Carlisle as they studied fine art and realised they shared a love of the great, wild, outdoors.

Since then, they have travelled the world, including tracking wolves, lynx and brown bear in the freezing winter of the Carpathian Mountains in Europe.

They got in touch with Ray Mears in 1997 and learned all about bushcraft, before joining his company, Woodlore, and becoming instructors themselves.

They struck out on their own and set up Woodsmoke in 2002.

The couple, and their assistant instructors offer a range of classes that include plantlore, tracking, axe workshops, wild foods and wilderness cookery and canoeing as well as how to build shelters, make fires, hunt, trap and prepare animals.

The choice of courses (from a weekend family ‘taster’ to a seven day nomadic journey through the Lakes) is gradually expanding and this April sees their first organised trip abroad – two weeks in the Kalahari Desert of Namibia.

There they will live with the San bush people and learn hunting and tool skills before setting off on what the brochure describes as: “A hands on, desert skills course... you will be expected to hike, build, gather, trap, dig and cook.

“You will sleep in the bush, under stars or canvas, cook over open fires and walk with the San through the vast Namibian landscape.”

It sounds rough and ready and really quite dangerous, but Ben points out: “The most dangerous part of the expedition is the British roads and getting to the airport.

“In Africa the biggest problems will be sunburn and diarrhoea.”

The 12 places for the Namibia trip were soon filled, with adventurers including a psychiatric nurse, a military doctor, a paramedic and a couple of GPs.

Ben admits most of their customers are men, but adds: “About 30 per cent are women.

“We are very female-friendly with two female instructors and women are getting more into it.”

The most “hardcore” trip is called the ‘Abo’ Course – living as a British aboriginal.

Not for the novice, the first two days are spent learning key skills and strategies for living off the land, then you set off with just a knife, a pot, some fish hooks and some fishing line for three days and three nights of living on your wits and off whatever you can find.

The brochure admits this is a “difficult and challenging course”, but Ben stresses that those who take part get a lot out of it.

“It is the weirdest thing, going camping with just a pot rattling with fishing hooks,” he smiles.

“It is hard to stay hydrated because all the water you collect must be boiled, you have a low food intake and you are running out of carbohydrates.

"It takes three days for your brain to work out that there is no fridge to go to any more. You get headaches and food fantasies.

"But you find that it is immensely empowering, once you have learned to cope with hunger.

"I've been overseas where there has been no food available for a couple of days and it is not the big issue that it seems to be, you just crack on."

You might think this £500 trip would be least popular and hardest to fill, but all but two of the 12 places have already been snapped up. All courses are held on privately owned land and the instructors ensure all water is boiled and that all food collected is checked for toxicity before anyone is allowed to eat it.

It seems odd that as we increasingly develop, refine and depend more on technology and constantly demand quicker, cleaner and more efficient lives, we are also looking to return to ancient methods of providing and surviving.

While we're buying more of the 'pop and ping' part-cooked no-fuss ready meals, there is also a growing hunger for wild food and self-sufficiency.

Ben reckons the work done by him, Ray Mears and others helps increase awareness in the environment.

He said: "It makes people more aware and through that comes respect. Through knowledge comes empowerment and enjoyment. Bushcraft is about being a human being and being self-reliant."

Ben and Lisa are also big fans of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and his ethos of countryside foraging, growing your own and buying local.

Ben concedes that unless you're collecting berries and nuts, much of the countryside store cupboard can be "a little bland at best".

Though there are some memorable tastes and flavours to be found: "I've eaten fox, rabbits, magpie, puff adder, giant rhino beetles and locusts.

"I've eaten fox in the UK. When I collected some rabbits from a gamekeeper, I noticed a dead fox in his boot and he said he was just going to dump it.

"I thought it was a waste to let it get eaten by worms so I said I would take it.

"It was the hardest thing I've had to prepare because they are very cute and I kept dogs as a youngster.

"It was hard, but it was tasty. It had a porky texture and there was a subtle hint of mackerel which must have come from all the insects it had eaten.

"The shells of insects contain the same chemical as lobsters.

"Grey squirrel is fantastic, I'd eat that over rabbits any day.

"Limpets are very rubbery and not worth the bother, but magpie is good, just like beef.

"Abroad, I've eaten all kinds of insects from giant rhino beetles to locusts.

"We ate puff adder in Namibia, which was lovely, just like calamari.

"The Bushmen refused to eat it and said if you eat it, your skin will fall off.

“Apparently one of them had eaten an adder in the past and his skin had shed like a snake. But it was fine!”

While Ben and Lisa are looking to lead more trips abroad, Cumbria will remain their base.

Ben explained: “Location-wise, the Lakes are fantastic – you can teach wilderness skills and you are in the wilderness.

“It all has its charms. I like living in the north and the ruggedness here, but the rolling Teletubbiness of the south is great as well.

“I just like my life. I love camping and being outdoors.

“The thing I like about it the most is seeing the year change.

“But it is so nice to come indoors sometimes!

“Electricity is such an amazing invention! To come in and put the kettle on and have a cup of tea without making a fire, fetching the water and boiling it up.

“To have a cup of tea and a hot shower is wonderful.

“We’re not trying to play the primitive or hark back to the Stone Age

“Some people honestly think we live in the woods, even though we have been communicating with them by email!”

Contact Woodsmoke at: [www.woodsmoke.uk.com](http://www.woodsmoke.uk.com)