

LEARNING TO ROUGH IT, NATURALLY

A school that can teach you to eat weeds, stalk prey, and build a fire without using matches • by Germaine W. Shames

Every weekend camper's nightmare: Your backpack's carried off by a bear, your tent washes down the river, and your turbo lighter runs out of butane. You're alone in the wilderness—or almost. Something big and hairy peers out at you from the fathomless tangle of bush. You contemplate dialing 911, but you left your cellular phone in the car, miles and miles away via a trail from which you strayed hours ago.

If you've lost the instinct for spear throwing, not to worry. Caveperson skills can be relearned. "Too many people today feel like aliens on their own planet," asserts naturalist Del Hall, creator of the Nature Awareness School. "They head into the woods with a bunch of fancy gear, and if anything gets lost, they go running for the nearest trailhead. They don't stop and realize that everything they need is already there."

I have come to Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains to spend a week at Hall's school, a quirky cross between a Boy Scout camp and a stage set for *Clan of the Cave Bear*. Although Hall owns over 300 mountainous acres here, the hub of activity centers on three rustic shelters: a three-sided cabin comprising a classroom and camp kitchen; a lean-to; and a Native American-style wickiup. A wood-burning-fire pit encircled by tree



ALTERNATIVE VACATIONS

Back to Basics

Classes for the Nature Awareness School are seasonal, running from April through October. Prices range from \$155 for a weekend introduction to \$445 for a weeklong immersion. Offerings include wild-plant foraging, tracking, tanning, log-cabin building, and "earth philosophy." Cabin rentals and Native American-style vision quests in the wilderness can also be arranged. Students either drive to the school or fly into nearby Charlottesville, Virginia.

The school boasts few amenities, but at least the food is edible (you needn't cultivate a taste for grasshoppers). Three square meals a day are provided, including such novelties as venison sloppy joes and fresh-brewed sassafras tea.

Indoctrinees bathe in a spring-fed pond or by garden hose—sorry, no hot tub. Camping is in crude shelters, and your "bed" is made of hay. Come prepared to rough it. Contact the Nature Awareness School; Box 219 G; Lyndhurst, VA 22952; 540/377-8068

—G.W.S.

stumps serves as an open-air dining room. At a discreet distance stand a pair of matched portable toilets that assail our olfactory senses each time a wind blows toward camp. Prominently displayed in the main building, an engraved sign announces NO SNIVELING.

Hall, an ageless, enviably fit former navy fighter pilot, made a fortune in aerospace investments and high-stakes real estate. Then, after taking a huge financial hit, Hall crash-landed back to earth. He began a multiyear bout of soul-searching—and eventually phased out most of his business ventures.

"My life was laid out in front in me," he says, gesturing around the camp with a handmade arrow he has been fletching. "Clearly, I was meant to use all I know about the natural world to help people get in touch with themselves. The practical skills are a vehicle to something deeper."

Thirteen well-scrubbed campers, weighted down by bulging duffels and fanny packs, plod up to the camp to join me for the course. First to arrive are four adolescent males, one of whom carries a chocolate layer cake in celebration of his 15th

birthday. Gradually, an eclectic tribe assembles around the fire: two bankers, a computer nerd, a jazz pianist, a chess instructor... All civilized folk seeking to rekindle a primal flame long extinguished. "You don't have to be Native American to feel connected to the earth," Hall assures us. "All of your ancestors knew and did the things we're going to learn this week."

Shelter, water, fire, and food—we begin with the basics. Surely our ancestors didn't need to be reminded of what it takes to sustain life, but those of us who've grown up with climate control and TV dinners eagerly copy the words into composition books. Freshly showered and fed, we hardly realize that we are talking survival. Hall wastes no time in administering our first dose of reality.

Making fire the old-fashioned way, using a hand bow drill, is like playing the violin on one knee while arm-wrestling a midget. You sweat. Your body contorts. Every muscle resists this primordial choreography that is supposedly your birthright.

Sean, a hulking young law enforcement officer whose biceps rival any Tarzan's, hunches over his bow,

panting, muscles pumping. Slowly, a scant wisp of smoke begins to rise from the kindling. A tiny, tenuous ember forms. Sean crouches down with his lips puckered and gently blows. The spark flickers.

Trembling with excitement, he maneuvers his tinder into position. The other students fall silent, watching. The firemaker prostrates himself in a posture of prayer, lips pressed to the ground. As he breathes life into the coal, a drop of perspiration rolls off the tip of his nose, extinguishing it.

Nearby, Barry, a marathon runner with the stamina of a Tarahumara Indian, sets to work with aplomb. After several tries, he births an ember. Transfixed, he finesses the coal, not more than a luminous speck, onto his tinder. It catches, bursting into flames in his callused hands. Moved to tears, he utters, "This is humbling."

Brought down a peg on the evolutionary totem, the following morning we trudge into the woods for an introduction to foraging. "There's a deep, subtle communication that goes on between plants and people," Hall says with reverence as he munches on a handful of wild sorrel. "You've got friends out there." Poison ivy mines our path. Overhead, squirrels pummel us with the emptied husks of hickory nuts, their aim steadily improving.

"Take the dandelion," Hall goes on. "Our culture has declared war on this precious little plant. Humans have become so denatured that they can't recognize a gift right in front of their faces."

We penetrate deeper into the woods, sampling mustard greens, sniffing birch bark—shocking our molluscified senses with smells and tastes so unblunted they cause us to gasp. Chastened, we return to camp for a lunch of pasta salad and Oreos.

Hall, an omnivore whose daily diet ranges from acorns to venison, waxes (*continued on page 89*)

ALTERNATIVE VACATIONS

(from page 86) lyrically about the nutritional value of rodents. Although wild plants provide a culinary bounty at least three seasons out of the year, it is the spear that feeds the world, he reminds us. We fashion our own, a time-consuming process of whittling the tips of sticks until they're razor-sharp, then hardening them over an open flame. Armed, we enter a more Darwinian realm, no longer actors in a creation myth but predators claiming our places in the food chain.

"Each time I track, a giant mystery unravels," Hall says, gazing at the ground as if each particle of grit held the meaning of life. "Every dent on the earth tells a story."

We drop to our hands and knees, avidly studying the prints Hall has marked with Popsicle sticks. Like aliens learning a new language, we search for some inherent logic in the seemingly random jots and scrapes. Deer or raccoon? we debate. Neither. Most belong to Hall's mutt, Rascal; the rest were made by a baby goat that follows Hall's wife, Lynne, about the camp as she does the morning's chores.

When we emerge from the woods and fox-walk back toward the main building, we hear Hall's voice. We pause, then pivot squint-eyed, but our wily teacher is nowhere to be seen. Again, the voice. Befuddled, we rotate a full 360 degrees, our eyes probing the green-and-brown patchwork from our boot tips on up to the treetops.

Suddenly the undergrowth stirs, then rips wide open, and Hall bursts forth covered in a thick natural camouflage of mud, leaves, and bark. Only the whites of his eyes and tooth enamel remain visible.

"Camouflage is the art of blending with your surroundings," he says, launching into the afternoon's lecture. "If you were to camouflage for a boardroom, you'd shine your shoes and put on a suit. If you're going into the woods to stalk deer, you smear

dirt on your Timberlands and cover your wristwatch. If you're a rodeo champion and normally wear a belt buckle the size of a maple leaf, you might want to leave it at home."

Hall, now an extension of the landscape, continues without the least self-consciousness. "And whatever you do," he adds, "don't smile. Grinning at a deer's like saying, 'I want to eat you.'"

As the week progresses, we learn to stalk, an aching slow way of sneaking up on an animal whose

**Armed, we
enter a
Darwinian
realm,
no longer
actors in
a creation
myth but
predators
claiming
our places
in the
food chain.**

inner radar can pick up a fly at a thousand meters. There's no bloodlust in our stealth, only a childlike longing to know the four-legged creatures whose tracks boggle us.

Encouraged by Hall's example, we kick off our Nikes and sandals, hoping to reconnect with the scout whose coding we vaguely sense in our DNA, yet can't seem to fully muster. Our denatured bodies have lost sync with the natural environment. Holding our breath, we prepare to cross a craggy field riddled with stones and nut shells. Assuming the role of a deer, Hall chews grass as we begin to stalk him—ungainly as declawed house cats trying to sneak up on fleet-footed prey.

"Humans are such sloppy walkers," Hall chides us. "They clunk along, disturbing everything in their paths. They've forgotten the simple joy of walking in the woods without making a sound, without the animals running away."

Cowed, sore-toed, and needing a shower, I console myself that even Hall hasn't always lived barefoot and au naturel. Only a decade ago, ensconced in a burglarproof million-dollar home and pitting himself against his own state-of-the-art motion detector, he would practice stalking in the middle of the night, clad only in his underwear.

"All kinds of people have come to this mountain," he sums up on the last morning, absently motioning toward the hodgepodge of discarded shoes arrayed beside the entrance to the encampment, "clergy, businessmen, my wife's gynecologist. Up here they connect with something beyond their ordinary experience. They go back to the office lighter." ■

Germaine W. Shames has written from six continents—soon to add the seventh—on topics ranging from bungee jumping to environmental politics. Her latest book is Transcultural Odysseys (Inter-cultural Press).