

An Outdoor Journey in Scotland: Wilderness Therapy



Bella Mehta

The invitation to join the first An-Turus Wilderness Therapy Journey filled me with excitement and mild anxiety in equal measure. As the mother of a toddler, writer and part-time facilitator, I was struggling to squash the daily grind into its 24-hour timeslot. But deeper than my preoccupation with regular meals, clean clothes, sleeping enough and returning the phone calls that keep things on track, I knew that this journey down the Spey River was just what I needed. As ever, my deeper sense was spot-on.

Living with my family in London, it had been a while since I had experienced nature in chunks bigger than my own garden, or the local playground. But whenever I go abroad to somewhere wild and beautiful, or visit the Lake District, Cornwall, or Snowdon (where I grew up) I feel an inward sigh and an upwards soar. Despite my love of nature, the thought of joining a group I didn't know, to do a sport I had never done (canoeing) was one of the more anxiety provoking ones...

My experience of organised 'outdoor pursuits' to date was varied. For the most part, I'd been 'instructed' by muscle-bound men who were clearly masters of their own training

wall, but not always the best confidence-builders for someone new to their world. I do like physical challenge, but I need a while to take it all in when I'm transported from city to country.

And I like to be treated like an adult. I've found a lot of organised activities to be quite infantilising – making me feel like I should walk along in a pair, not chew gum and listen to the safety instructions carefully (which of course I should!).

I arrived in Scotland on the overnight sleeper train from London Euston, a very pleasant way to travel, though I dreamt of Belgian detectives and murdered aristocrats. In my perfectly formed cabin, I pulled down the blinds on the council blocks of Camden Town and opened them after a sound sleep to the amazing sight of the Scottish Highlands at dawn. I got out at Newtonmore - perkier than I've been at 7am for a long while - to be met by Ruth Bradbrook, one of the founders of An-Turus.

Ruth Bradbrook and Nick Ray founded An-Turus as a Worker's Cooperative founded on first-hand knowledge of how therapeutic the outdoor environment can be, and a love of outdoor activity. Ruth, a triathlete based in Bristol, is also a facilitator of the IDHP (Institute for the Development of Human Potential) two-year post-graduate diploma and a Reality Therapist. Nick, a Transactional Analysis psychotherapist, works in Inverness and uses the outdoor environment as part of his work with individuals, couples and groups.

Ruth drove us the short distance to the campsite, and I met the others, including Nick. We were a mixed crowd from all over the UK, some with canoeing experience, some without. It was an easy meeting - there wasn't

any barking of introductions and job titles, name badges to be pinned on or information to be absorbed, and I enjoyed the early morning space and calm. After a cup of coffee, I was handed something that I now know is called a dry bag - to put in my rucksack which would be travelling in the canoe along with me for the next four days.

I was given a tent, sleeping bag and ground mat, all top notch equipment. I instantly remembered one of the challenges of camping - packing it all in. After the camp was packed up into the canoes, Ruth and Nick facilitated a short session where we had a chance to air some of our expectations and fears for the trip, and meet the people we would be travelling down the Spey River with for the next few days. I expected to be nervous about being away from my home, power shower, phone and the local coffee shop for a few days, but actually, it felt good to be leaving my comfort zone.

I was pleased to be paired up with Chris, an experienced canoeist and patient teacher, and a regular supporter on the An-Turus trips. Gary was the leader for the river journey and, like Ruth and Nick, he was a highly experienced adventure leader as well as a qualified therapist. The rare combination of physical challenge in the wild, in an environment of personal growth, embodied by Ruth, Nick and Gary, is An-Turus' unique offering.

Thus we set off downstream on the Spey River, about 100km from the coast. Once my nerves had subsided, and I had the hang

An-Turus Photo Album



of paddling, I was able to relax and lift my attention up to the amazing scenery. I saw families of ducks, swans, jumping fish, dragonflies, and the green grass and trees trailing into the clear water. Over the next few days we would also see wild deer, a pair of nesting ospreys, kingfishers and colonies of oyster catchers.

After an hour or so, Nick and Ruth led us on to a little beach and invited us all individually to enter consciously into the wilderness. The timing, location, and invitation were perfectly framed and this was a meaningful ritual that gave the whole trip an extra dimension.

The next few days were a relaxed rhythm of canoeing, tea and lunch stops, sometimes with an exercise or focused discussion, and sometimes just a chat amongst group members. An-Turus wilderness journeys have a therapeutic intention, and central to this is the open and caring environment that Ruth and Nick create. Ours was not a therapeutic trip, but I can see how for an individual, couple or group wanting to work on some aspect of personal or professional development, this is the perfect environment to speak the truth clearly and meet challenges in a positive way.

The isolation of the trip was wonderful. In the first five hours of the trip we saw no-one. Over the next few days we saw several friendly fishermen and a few other canoes... and someone who told us not to camp on their land! Occasionally we passed under a road bridge, or saw a train on the distant mountains, but the trip was a real immersion in the

wilderness. Our food was good – balanced, vegetarian and not abstemious as many camping trips can be (there was good coffee and mini mars bars as well as herbal tea and fresh fruit). Our equipment functioned well and I felt comfortable and safe on (and occasionally in) the river.

At the end of the day we stopped and set up camp, pulling our canoes up onto the riverside, or tethering them to a tree, and hauling everything out. We were camping on open land, not in campsites, and this added greatly to the sense of a relationship with nature and the environment around us. The first night was a bit strange, having never slept on my own in a tent, I found myself scared of being on my own out in the elements. We discussed a few ideas to help me feel safe – I could call out or move my tent nearer to someone else's. But after the discussion and suggestions, I felt fine, and set off across the field to my tent. I slept well and woke up to a most beautiful morning that will be one of my abiding memories of this trip.

Aside from the fear of being on my own overnight, there were other challenges. I found that packing equipment back into the same bags it came out (without losing my temper) to be hugely difficult. It may seem strange to be writing about the frustrations of bag-packing in this account of wilderness therapy, but as Ruth and Nick both reminded me, it's all part of the journey. Because the trip had a therapeutic intention, I had the licence and the skills around me to explore my reaction and internal process in a way that was very useful for

me. I saw at close quarters how I put unnecessary pressure on myself, how I am not gentle with my learning edges, and how my resultant fear of doing things badly or slowly, and being left behind feeds a cycle of anxiety.

This self-discovery was not new to me – I recognise the cycle and ways to get off it well by now – but it's been a while since I've stretched my own limits, pushed at my own boundaries and experienced it in a non-intellectual way. I found that reflecting in the environment we were in, being physically challenged away from the pressures of daily life was hugely uplifting to me.

Most of the people in our group didn't know each other before we set up, but the company was inspiring and enriching. Over the days we spent in the wilderness, I talked with people about art, money, drugs, jail, armed robbery, climbing, children, family, singing, teaching, cancer, maps, jobs, police, Ikea, shopping, farming, chocolate, smoking, the environment and many other things. I fond myself shrugging off layers of protection (against people? computers? pollution? demands? noise?) and being able to breathe like a child.

It was a pleasure to go on a well-organised, socially and environmentally responsible trip that was good fun and nourishing at the same time. It was a reminder of the beauty of the world. In theory you can see that anywhere even in London, where I sit now, watching the berries on the Rowan tree outside my house. But in the wilderness it's

obvious; foreground - stark beauty all around...

I came back with a bit more understanding of the river, and canoeing along it:

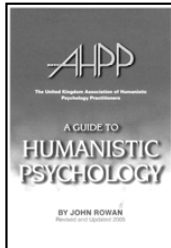
- You can't change the weather so don't worry about it
- Don't look at the rocks, look at where you want to go
- It's not necessary, or possible, to talk about everything
- The river flows fast & slow, shallow & deep, but only in one direction
- If your partner does something you didn't expect, perhaps he's not stupid – perhaps he's seen something you haven't
- It's good to earn your lunch
- Breathe and relax

The essence of Wilderness Therapy for me was being immersed in nature, self-sufficient but not struggling, and experiencing over several days the constant connection between me and whatever is beyond what we sense physically, feel emotionally or discuss intellectually. That connection is so self-apparent, so right, so obvious in the wild. In a busy life filled with work, family and children, it is something I glimpse out of the corner of my (mind's) eye or, more often it skitters past, uncaught and unacknowledged. I could hear a part of myself saying 'I need this! Remember that! Bring me here again.' I'll be back.

And in the meantime, I am moving out of London. It's a move that was in plan when I went on the trip, but the trip reaffirmed my deep desire to be near and a part of nature and a more connected way of life. Next month, my family and I move to an old ferry cottage with direct

access onto the River Thames. The swans and greenery I will see from the kitchen window remind me of my trip on the Spey, and I find myself wondering how to get hold of a second-hand canoe...

Bella Mehta is a graduate of the 2002-2004 IDHP Diploma in Humanistic Psychology, and works as a coach and facilitator as well as an organisational consultant with special interest in gender issues. She is the founder of Enspiral (www.enspiral.co.uk) and a co-author of the business handbook for women 'Make It Your Business'. Since the An-Turus Wilderness Therapy experience, she has moved house, not yet bought a canoe, but is booked on another journey with An-Turus in the summer.



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