



National Geographic and Toyota put Native Hands in their 125 Top UK Adventures. Their explorer & guerrilla geographer Daniel Raven-Ellison says why:

Potter in the Wild



Daniel Raven-Ellison

National Geographic and Toyota Route 125

Wild pottery involves digging your own clay from a river, crafting your own pots and then firing them in your own handmade fire. We travelled to Uckfield in Sussex to try this ancient technique.

For this adventure, my friend Dave and I drove to Uckfield to meet Ruby, a local artist, potter, basket maker, forager and wild fire expert, who is deeply connected to the local area. The next afternoon and morning were all about making clay pots, using things that we foraged. We started by taking off our shoes and entering Blackbrook, a tributary of the River Ouse that is rich in fine and sticky clay. Digging into it Dave and I soon learned how to make balls and roll them into worms to check that the clay was of the right consistency for crafting. Feeling the bed of the river squidge between my toes felt tickly, soothing and good.

We then walked up into the clearing of a broadleaf woodland where Ruby sparked a fire using flint and steel. Laid out on a rug was a selection of stunning pots that Ruby had made, each inspired by different traditional techniques. We were both taken in by a pot that was almost spherical apart from a small hole in its top. Simple, with carefully

placed notches and an irregular glaze. We both wanted to make a pot similar to this but did not think we would be capable. We were wrong.

Over the next forty-five minutes Ruby showed us how to prepare the clay, how to mould it into two halves of a sphere, how to join them together to make a ball and the technique for cutting the hole to turn it into a pot. The next phase was to decorate the pot. Ruby had brought her handmade wooden tools, bones, a comb and other objects that we used to mark and pattern our pots. After crafting the pots they needed to dry before they could be fired, so Dave and I made our way to a local pub for a feed and then retired to our luxury yurt on the neighbouring campsite.

The next morning was all about fire. We foraged for small and large dry sticks and were given a masterclass in starting a wild fire using steel, flint and a wide array of dried plants. After building up the fire we placed our pots in it until they were glowing bright red, baking for over an hour and hardening. At this stage Dave and I were both worried that our work would crack, but Ruby had added some crushed pots to our clay, which prevented too much air and moisture being trapped and therefore greatly reduced the chance of them cracking or splitting.

We were delighted when the pots came out of the fire. We had achieved and experienced far more than we had expected. As we finished we reflected on the long history of wild potters that we had joined. The earliest clay pots to have been discovered by archaeologists are around 20,000 years old. Knowing this was humbling and highly rewarding. It was good fun getting muddy and burning stuff too.

Ruby runs Native Hands courses on pottery, fire making and basketry throughout the year. You can request a course for a small group or join one of her planned events. Many of the courses are at the fantastic Wowo campsite which is where we glamped in a cosy yurt. The campsite welcomes fires and you will find rope swings and places for children to play all over the site.

If you want to learn how to make pots that will last I strongly recommend taking a course like this one. You will not only learn how to craft pots, but it is also a good way for children to learn about fire safety and responsibility.

[Daniel Raven-Ellison](#), Guerilla Geographer [National Geographic and Toyota Route 125](#)

