

Native Hands featured in the Life & Style section:

A wild pottery weekend in the woods

You've heard of wild swimming and wild camping, but what about wild pottery? Frederika Whitehead heads to East Sussex to dig for clay, shape it and bake it over an open fire

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*Pots win prizes ... some of the items produced during the wild pottery weekend.
Photograph: Frederika Whitehead*

My friend Fiona is trying to persuade me to go on a course with her. Apropos of nothing, she says: "They do courses where you can learn to tan animal hides with brain fluids, but you might not like that. Let's do wild pottery instead."

She wants us to go to the woods and make pottery like the Romans did: pulling clay out of the earth with our own bare hands; shaping it into pots while sitting on logs in the forest; firing the pots in a blaze we have lit by knocking a flint against a piece of steel.

It takes a short while for me to agree to go along with the plan. I'm not convinced that anything I've pulled out of the earth will be good for either use or ornament. But few can resist the allure of a Ray Mears moment, and I'm soon won over. It's always nice to hone your survival skills, just in case of Armageddon.

Fiona signs us up for two consecutive weekends with a Native Hands guide called Ruby at the delightful Wowo campsite in Lewes, East Sussex.

Ruby is a potter by training, but she's also an expert forager. Over the two weekends, as well as teaching us to how make simple pottery, she also shows us which fungi make good firelighters, where to find dry wood in the forest when its raining (it was) and how to light a fire using just a flint and a piece of steel.

I don't suppose I had ever given much thought as to how the Romans made pottery before, but it was disarmingly simple. Although I have a sneaking suspicion that having an expert guide who showed us exactly where to look for the clay and how to make it into reasonable-looking pots made it an awful lot easier ...

We harvested the clay from the banks of a stream running past Wowo's "glamping" yurts, mixed it with some pre-prepared grog (biscuit fired clay that has been ground to a powder) and fashioned it into pots in our hands while sitting on logs around the campfire.

The pots need time to dry out before firing, so we left it until the following weekend to fire them.

On our second trip to the woods I surprised myself by lighting a fire very quickly with my flint and steel. But I gave trying the bow drill a miss – rubbing two sticks together really hard for a really long time seemed a bit too much work for a relaxing weekend break.

Ruby took us for a walk through the forest, showing us where to find the best kindling for the fire. She recommends silver birch bark for its volatile oils, along with broken-up bulrushes and "punk" wood – rotten logs that are dry and crumble easily into small pieces. She also pulls out a bag of cleavers – I recognise them as "sticky burrs" – which she collected a while back and has been drying at home.

We made a nest shape from the dried cleavers, which we packed with slivers of "King Alfred's cakes" (bracket fungus), splinters of punk wood and the fluff from a broken-up bulrush. Ruby flicked a spark from the flint and steel into the middle of this nest. When the spark landed on the bracket fungus it became an ember, then she picked it up in one hand, closing the nest at the top with the ember inside. She swung her arm back and forward like the pendulum of a clock, fanning the ember until the whole nest burst into flames.

Having made the fire, we placed our pots around the edge of it to warm gently before we put them in, so as to lessen the shock of the temperature change. After a while we laid a platform of logs over the fire, stacked the pots tightly together on the centre of the platform and then built a wigwam of sticks around them to keep the heat in.

And then we sat in peace in the woods, watching the fire crackle around our pots, and praying that none of them cracked in the heat.

Fiona outlined her settlement fantasies. She wants to use the pots we have just made to cook food foraged from the woods. There is talk about skinning rabbits and plucking chickens, and Fiona wonders if anyone had tried the bow and arrow-making course that's also on offer. Ruby shows us the bag she has made from the skin of a deer, with horn buttons.

When the fire has burnt down we ease out our pots. Those who want to reduce their porosity, so they can be used to store fluids, pour milk into them to make a glaze.

Back home, in my urban flat with its treeless view, I show my rough-and-ready wood-fired pot to my other half. He looks at it disparagingly, but I don't care. When Armageddon comes, not only will I know how to light a fire, but I'll also know how to make something to cook the dinner in.

• *Frederika Whitehead attended a Native Hands wild pottery course at Wowo campsite near Lewes in Sussex, priced £50 per day. Native Hands is on Facebook.*