

Bruce Parry: 'Human beings have really big problems ahead'

Tim Adams

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Lunch With Bruce Parry Illustration: Lyndon Hayes/The Observer

The adventurer and explorer has been to the Amazon and the Arctic. Now he's setting up a project in Wales as a personal response to the climate crisis

Eventually, even the most intrepid adventurer has to come home. In the past 20 years Bruce Parry has been initiated, for our viewing pleasure, into indigenous tribes in Congo, Venezuela and Mongolia. He has had thorns forced through his nose in Papua New Guinea and has hunted crocodiles in Ethiopia. He has navigated the Amazon and sledged across the Arctic. His latest adventure in assimilation, however, is perhaps his most formidable challenge yet. In October last year the BBC ethnographer, former Royal Marines fitness instructor and determined hedonist moved from his long-time base in Ibiza to an isolated hamlet in mid-Wales. He plans to be here for many years to come.

I met him for lunch in the only cafe for 10 miles around, Cwtch in Pont rhyd-y groes, which is built above a gorge of the Ystwyth river beside the old workings of a lead mine. Parry has cycled from his cottage beside a waterfall on the neighbouring Hafod estate. It's a significant lunch for Parry in that the salad leaves – seven varieties – at the cafe are the first crop from a community garden project that he has helped to establish in the walled garden of the demolished estate manor house.

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Food was one of the reasons that he ended up here. Having spent 30 years as a professional nomad, he not only wanted to put down roots, he also wanted to pull some up. He grew up in Devon, has family in Scotland and a Welsh surname, but he wasn't sure where to settle. "I wanted somewhere wild," he says, "and I wanted to get into wild food as a way of reconnecting with the landscape." His first foraging outing brought him to Hafod: it felt so right that he ended up buying the old stone cottage that he stayed in.

Parry has an instantly likable and high-energy presence. He has made no secret of indulging in all the delights that Ibiza can offer – as well as taking just about every hallucinogen under the sun in order to be fully accepted in different jungle communities. He turned 50 in March. How, I wonder, did he cope with his first wet Welsh winter?

"I feel that was my initiation," he says, smiling. He has a wood fire. "I spent most of the winter in a hat and scarf inside. I survived that OK, though I haven't met the midges yet – I think that's August."

Just in 10 minutes sitting in Cwtch – the name means both cosy corner and hug – you can see Parry's gift for connection with people. He knows everyone who comes in like an old mate. Dom, the chef and proprietor here, and now purveyor of "walled-garden lettuce", is greeted with genuine affection, and each delicious vegetarian dish off the specials board he brings out produces fresh rapture from Parry. "You're on fire today, Dom!"

There is more to Parry's return than any kind of homesickness. He believed, having had an immersive understanding of the wisdom of some of the oldest human communities, that he should now try to put some of that into practice in the place he fell to earth. Parry had spent four or five years up to 2017 making a very personal film, *Tawai: A Voice From the Forest*. It was both a portrait of the perilous, joyful existence of one of the last hunter-gatherer societies, the Penan people of Borneo, and a meditation on the ways in which we are destroying their world – and our planet.

"*Tawai* was the last project," he says. "I guess I thought I had seen it all, but then I met the Penan and there was something completely different about them." It was not only that they had a genuine pre-agricultural existence, of the kind that humans lived for 85% of the lifetime of our species. "They had no competition, no hierarchy. They were the only group I had been in that had no pecking order, no chief, no elders."

He was struck by what such an egalitarian heritage might mean. Parry's journeys along the Amazon and across the Arctic had long since impressed on him the crisis that our planet is facing, a crisis of climate, and of consumerism, and he felt it was no longer enough to report the issues, he had to try to live what felt like possible solutions. His plan is to open up his house and create a small experiment in communal living.

"I have no doubt that human beings have problems ahead," he says. "Really big problems. And we are not doing it right." The BBC was keen for him to carry on "gallivanting": "Let's go down the Mekong, we can talk about important things ...!" and

there was no doubt some temptation in that. “But the problem is not really how China is polluting its rivers. The problem is how we are all, mainly in the west, living our lives.”

Parry talks fluently about the issues around land ownership in Britain, which has caused the majority of us to be so disconnected from the living environment. He sees the recent One Planet development scheme in Wales – which allows anyone to build on agricultural land if they follow certain self-sufficiency guidelines – as a model of a future revolution.

“We are swimming so deeply in a world of competition and aggression and division that we don’t even see it,” he says. “We are being fed this information that money and stuff will make you happy but I think that the right narrative can create a massive shift. We can’t all have a Lamborghini, but maybe we could all have a bit of land and some joy and music and harmony.”

In Ibiza, of course, those qualities were in generous supply. Where does he go to dance in Ceredigion? He mentions occasional late-night excursions up to the alternative communities in Machynlleth, 25 miles north.

“I could have easily stayed in Ibiza,” he says. “We could have been having a long rosé and seafood lunch on the beach, rather than Dom’s fantastic salads. It wasn’t that all that fizzled out. But what I learned especially from the tribes is that there is an extra ingredient from knowing a place.”

We talk about the upcoming engagements he has to discuss this thinking; one at the Port Eliot festival in the summer, another with the Canadian Stephen Jenkinson, the author of *Die Wise*, who has used the insights of a long career in palliative care to propose answers to our “culture failure”. “If you are part of a tribe,” says Parry, “knowing that when you die you are going to feed the tree that feeds the fruit that feeds your community and that your life will be part of the whole ecosystem is a powerful thing.”

Though Parry has more bucket-list ticks than most of the rest of us put together, he hasn’t done some of the things that many men of his age have achieved. Having lived “polyamorously” for many years, he recently split from a long-term partner. He has no kids and, he says, no particular yearning for any.

“Without question there is a lot of me that loves freedom,” he says. “But my driving force now is that I am madly trying to figure out what my role can be in moving this community idea forwards – though maybe what I am proposing is only valid for what comes out of the ashes of the next big financial crash.”

There is no doubt he will be well placed to survive catastrophe. He is trying to live mostly from what he can forage – he loves cooking, he says, though he fears that love is not always shared by guests. “I make my own bread, grind my own wheat, soak my own pulses. I have 25kg of wheat, huge tubs of chickpeas and lentils. If I’m ever stuck for a couple of months, I’ll be fine.”

I wonder if the BBC are keen to film this latest venture? He suggests they would like to, but his new Welsh friends insist it will be over their dead bodies.



Bruce and Tim shared *Dwarf bean, beetroot and feta salad* £4; *red pepper, courgette and olive shakshuka* £4; *spinach and mushroom filo parcels* £4 **They Drank** Water; filter coffee £1.50 Photograph: Keith Morris/The Observer

“I definitely think I have more to share on this, though,” he says, with a laugh.

We exercise that principle in the first instance by taking two forks to Dom’s lemon drizzle cake.

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