

A Year in Green Tea and Tuk-Tuks

My Unlikely Adventure Creating an
Eco Farm in Sri Lanka

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Extract

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Chapter One

An Indian Walk

You can only be lost if you are trying to get somewhere.

Ram Tzu

Easter 1974. Surrey, England.

I am seven years old. I wake to the sound of Canada geese flying overhead, their guttural shriek increasing in pitch as they swoop in to land on the lake beside the house. Nobody else is up. I put on my clothes, creep downstairs and out through the kitchen, taking the tool shed key. I find a small wheelbarrow and a pair of clippers, then head down the top and bottom lawns towards the stream, into the area we had been clearing the day before.

A huge bonfire has burnt to the ground, leaving a ring of green leaves and charred sticks around a core of smouldering cinders, like a giant crown of thorns. I start to throw these into the middle, rekindling the heat. Within seconds, little flames appear, which I feed with half-burnt branches.

Then I take the clippers from the barrow and start lopping small branches off an alder, felled by one of my brothers the day before. A misty silver light hangs over the lake, slowly dispersing to reveal

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the full bloom of spring: the budding leaves on old oaks; pink-white blossoms on weeping cherries; daffodils rearing their orange-yellow heads.

July 1976. Surrey, England.

I am cutting grass in the late afternoon, driving a white Bolens mini-tractor. There's been drought all summer and my father is pumping water from the lakes to revive trees planted in the spring, using a huge bowser mounted on a trailer.

I'm James Hunt at Brands Hatch. The challenge: to cut the grass, as well as possible, as fast as possible. I swing through chicanes, between apple trees and garden furniture at full throttle, in top gear, making sure that I clip the last tuft of grass at the border, allowing the cutting edge of the rotating blades below me to sweep over the turf boundary with the flower bed. My father will be pleased.

Later, after tea, I race around the garden on my bicycle, surveying the day's work. The manicured grass highlights the furrowed trunks of old oak trees, the massive splaying branches of Amazonian *gunaras* drooping to the ground, the trailing tentacles of weeping willows forming tunnels on the banks of the lake.

Now I'm Barry Sheene, shifting weight through corners and out-braking Kenny Roberts to clinch the world title. The light is soft, golden, velvet. The smell of freshly mown grass fills the air. Two white swans drift across the water as the sound of the M3 motorway seeps into Eden.

October 1977. Surrey, England.

Sunday lunch. My father is holding court. Sir James, the headmaster of his old school in Australia, is seated at the other end of the table. In a few days, Sir James will make a speech to those assembled for

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the opening of my father's magnum opus, an extension to the house, filled with books, pictures and eccentric objects collected from his travels. A shrunken human head from Papua New Guinea, with flowing black silk hair, the lips and eyelids sewn up with thread to prevent them from cracking; a haunted sedan chair containing a Prussian officer's hat decorated with deep-blue feathers; a sketch of temple murals in Ceylon by Australian artist Donald Friend; a Roman bath, carved from a single block of marble, retrieved from the rose garden when my parents first bought the house.

My father is telling the story of how he ran away from school in 1940, lied about his age, joined the army and set off to rescue my grandfather from a PoW camp at the age of 15. I am enthralled.

'I went to Sir James and told him what I wanted to do. And do you know what he said? He said if that was what I really wanted to do, he knew he couldn't stop me.' Sir James smiles as my father recalls his reaction.

'And what about your mother?' another guest asks.

'Oh, I told her I was joining a scout group, called Force X. It was only after talking to someone at a drinks party in Melbourne that she discovered what that was. By then, I was on my way to Ceylon.'

'Ceylon?'

'Ceylon was the first place I saw outside Australia. I remember standing on deck as we approached Colombo. All I could see was palm trees and sandy beaches. Surely this must be paradise, I said to myself.'

My fascination for the East stemmed from these stories. Ceylon, Calcutta, Cooch Behar, all sounded so exotic, fertile with mystery, heavy with intrigue. After the war, my father lived and worked in Calcutta for the two years leading up to Indian independence in 1947, working as ADC to the last Governor-General of Bengal, his

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godfather. My brothers and I had grown up with near-mythic tales about my father's catalogue of accidents on a Harley-Davidson, which he had been required to ride at more than 30 miles an hour at the front of the Governor-General's motorcade, to reduce the risk of assassination. An ambulance followed, ready to scoop my father up after collisions with cows and bullock carts, or wayside drains.

I loved tales of his bearer, Rai Bahadar Bibhuti Baba Mookerjee, who walked the streets of Calcutta barefooted, before toasting bread between his toes for the Governor-General's breakfast. The romance and horror of these stories made a deep impression on me, and I knew from an early age that I would head for India at the earliest opportunity.

Although my brothers and I would groan and lift our eyes to the ceiling as my father launched into yet another rendition of 'the Harley story', or one of his many war adventures, I was always secretly glad to hear them again. They filled my mind with fantastic images of Kipling's *Jungle Book*, fused with my father's colourful exploits.

At the same time, I felt a resonance with the more mystical attraction of the East. I was drawn to films about Buddhist monks, intrigued by words like 'zen' and 'yoga'. I liked the idea of walking through burnt, dusty landscapes in bare feet, of living very simply. The concept of enlightenment fascinated me.

My childhood vision of God was of an imposing bearded man with flowing white hair, seated on a throne in the clouds, controlling life on earth with some sort of giant computer. When I was five, I was stunned to hear one of my two brothers reveal that the air we breathe encompasses the entire globe. The concept of air being everywhere, that the breath I took into my lungs could be shared by people on

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the other side of the world, completely entranced me. God was everywhere. In everything and nothing.

Later, my image of a great man in the sky came into conflict with a belief in some kind of universal energy. I found it difficult to equate the Christian vision of God with the feeling of oneness sparked by the summer sun falling on yellow roses. Nature, rather than the Bible, became synonymous with God.

By the time I was a teenager, I had come to believe that the only way to find 'happiness' was through pursuing the techniques offered by the Eastern mystics. Those guys had been at it for thousands of years. They must have discovered the secret, the key to 'being happy, all of the time'.

I borrowed a book from my mother about basic meditation and started staring at a candle in my bedroom, waiting to be transported to a transcendental paradise. Nothing happened.

Despite my disappointment, I persisted. I read and re-read Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, developing a naive fascination with the life of wandering ascetics. I continued to meditate and dabbled in a form of yoga brought to the West by an Indian saint called Paramahansa Yogananda at the beginning of the last century.

When I left school and finally travelled to India, the experience proved more powerful than I had ever imagined. It was freedom, vitality and life as I had never known. The air was heavy with possibilities. I was intoxicated by India, not just by the smells, colours and sounds, but by the energy of ordered chaos that permeated everything I saw. I felt like I had come home.

One day in February 1990, I was sitting on a sand dune in northern Sudan, staring at a rising full moon in a star showered sky. For nine

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months I had been cycling through Africa with three friends, riding through vast expanses of wild untarnished bush on a mountain bike and the three-seater 'trandem' originally used by *The Goodies*, a zany BBC series from the 1970s.

The deserts of Sudan had presented new challenges, forcing us to walk long distances on narrow donkey tracks connecting settlements beside the Nile. Although I was converted to the benefits of bicycle travel, the physical process of walking began to attract me even more. I found that the direct contact with the earth created a primal connection with the landscape, linking the sense of self with all that lay around, like a glimpse of something eternal, infinite and universal. Sitting on that sand dune, I suddenly knew that, one day, I would undertake a long walk. I did not know when, or exactly where it would take me. But I knew that I would travel alone on the dusty paths of rural India, the country that I had been obsessed with for years.

I returned from Africa in April 1990, disenchanted with the Western world. After a year of living like a nomad in the bush, life in London seemed totally divorced from what I now perceived as reality. I found it hard to see how I could fit into a massive economic machine that was systematically destroying the planet. The compromises appeared too great.

This period coincided with huge media interest in environmental problems, from rainforest destruction to global warming and holes in the ozone layer. I could not help feeling that we were heading for a planetary emergency, and that most people were living in a state of denial about the implications. It was hard to see what kind of career I could pursue without being a part of the problem. So I resolved to do whatever I could to raise awareness, through research,

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writing and, if possible, making films. To try to make ends meet during this period, I used my increasing passion for cooking to secure a series of jobs in London pubs and restaurants, most notably a six month stint at the renowned River Café in Hammersmith.

After making a film in India about pollution in the Ganges, which re-united Bill Oddie, one of the original Goodies, with the tran-dem, I started working with Herbie Girardet, an environmental writer and film-maker based between London and Wales. As the media interest waned during the 90s, and corporate 'greenwash' tactics were used to discredit the science behind climate change, my understanding and passion for the issues increased.

At the same time, I found myself on a spiritual quest. I began to believe that the world was engaged in a transition, shifting our values from competition and greed to cooperation and synthesis, giving birth to a new vision, the 'divine marriage' of inner and outer, male and female, reason and intuition, Matter and Spirit. My determination to embark on a long walk in India seemed to form an integral part of the quest. It was now or never.

I walked out of the town of Kanyakumari, the southern tip of India, on 30 September 1996, carrying a small pack on my back and a black umbrella. Six months later, I walked into Calcutta, having walked more than 2,000 miles and experienced the heaven and hell of India on a daily basis. I had been surrounded and attacked in a remote fishing village on the coast of Orissa; spent a night lost in a forest known for leopards, tigers and elephants; witnessed ancient festivals and rituals in the temples of Tamil Nadu. My guts were populated with battalions of alien bacteria and my feet felt like hardened leather soles.

A few days later, I was back in Bombay, ready for my return flight to England.

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However, I delayed my departure to see Ramesh Balsekar, a spiritual teacher I wanted to meet. Before becoming a ‘guru’, Ramesh had studied at the London School of Economics, then he rose to the highest echelons in one of India’s largest banks, living his life very much in the material, modern world. Rather than prescribing rituals, meditation techniques or magical formulas, he showed his students how to undermine the conditioned processes of the mind.

Every morning in his living room, Ramesh held *satsang*, a spontaneous discourse with anybody who turned up. Although he fulfilled the traditional role in the guru-disciple relationship, there was none of the razzmatazz that surrounded the personality cults of most modern teachers.

For the next week, I spent every morning listening to Ramesh expound his radical teaching, which supported a concept I had nurtured since childhood and was increasingly verified by modern science – that our sense of freewill is ultimately an illusion. One afternoon, lying under the fan in my hotel room and flicking through one of Ramesh’s books, my attention was caught by one sentence: ‘What you are trying to find is what you already are.’ I had heard, or read, similar words on countless occasions. Usually I found them rather annoying: if it’s so simple, why can’t I grasp it? Why am I so miserable, searching for something which is staring me in the face?

This time however, something happened.

I had a sudden intuitive flash that lasted a split second but lit up the room. My spine jolted. I burst into laughter. It was tragic, but funny at the same time. After years of seeking something, I suddenly realized that ‘it’ has been too close to see. I walked over to the mirror. I was in my reflection and my reflection was in me.

Ironically, the confusion in my life was being dissolved by the

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words of a retired bank manager, rather than some wizened ascetic sage in a Himalayan cave. There was, however, one conundrum that I found hard to resolve. My passion for environmental problems seemed to be at odds with the core precepts of the teaching. If everything was as it should be, why would I bother concerning myself with such things?

Some years later, I saw that this was misconceived. Given my ‘programming’, that combination of genes and continually evolving social and environmental conditioning that creates our individual personality, I have no alternative but to do what I do. I began to see that, right now, in this moment, everything is perfect. It could not be any other way. However, that acceptance need not imply agreement. For example, although I *accept* that the current form of free market capitalism is a reality, it does not necessarily imply that I *agree* with it. If I feel driven to work towards environmental awareness and an ecological lifestyle, then that is the part that I am destined to play. Ultimately, I have no option.

Chapter Two

Lanka or La-La-Land?

Don't be afraid to go out on a limb.

That's where the fruit is.

Anon

31 May 1997. London.

I'm in the upstairs bar of a Notting Hill pub with my old friend Toby, where a friend of mine is running a club on Sunday afternoons. The members are mostly fashionistas and media types, pop promo directors and a few grungy models, eating lunch, drinking, playing backgammon, powdering their noses in the loos. It's the usual London scene. I've been back from India for three weeks. Nothing has changed. We order a bottle of red wine and start setting up a backgammon board.

'Who did you say was coming?' Toby asks.

'A girl called Rosie. I met her at that yoga retreat in Scotland before going to India. She's bringing a friend.'

'All right!'

'Don't get too excited, mate. No idea who she is.'

An hour later, Rosie appears. I walk over, give her a hug, intro-

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duce Toby. 'And this is Yvette,' Rosie says. A dark-skinned girl with long curly hair appears from the top of the stairs, wearing a dog-tooth jacket and black pants. In profile, she looks almost Ethiopian, her slender neck and fine features balanced with a pronounced forehead. She is stunningly exotic.

'Hi,' she says, holding out her hand. Is that accent Irish, American?

'Hi, Yvette,' I reply. 'So, where are you from? I can't place your accent.'

'Barbados, originally. I live in LA now.'

I'm entranced. We sit down, order more wine, continue with our game, Rosie and Toby playing against Yvette and me.

'So, Rosie tells me you've been walking through India.' Yvette throws the dice and turns towards me. 'Why on earth did you do that?' I hate this question, since I have no adequate reply.

'You know what? I really don't know.' I had to be honest. 'It was just one of those things that evolved, took on a life of its own . . .'

'What did you get out of it?' She's direct, penetrating. I like it.

'I met a teacher, a guru. An old man in Bombay. Kind of made sense of my life for the first time.'

We talk for hours. She wants to know about India. I want to know about California. When I wake the next day, I am enraptured.

In July, I flew west for the first time in my life, to see Yvette. She had moved to Venice Beach three years before, where she had started her journey as a ceramic artist. She met me at LAX, wearing a short black dress and driving a red pick-up. The city baked under a sun-drained sky, full of space, hazy white light and adrenalin dreams. The white noise of 'the grid' burnt the ends off my nerves, like flaring match heads. California was a buzz, but so alien to the world in which I had recently been immersed.

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‘Come travelling with me in India,’ I kept saying to Yvette. ‘This all seems so unreal by comparison.’

‘OK,’ she said one day. ‘Let’s do it. I’ve always wanted to go there.’

A month later, Yvette had left her life in LA and we were heading to India, where we planned to travel together while I was to write a book about my walk. At the time, I really believed that I wanted to live there and was intent on convincing Yvette that Tamil Nadu was far more attractive than Venice Beach.

After a few weeks, I had been completely cured of that aspiration. The frustrations of India got the better of me. Rather than revelling in the sensory stimulation, I could see only escalating pollution and desperate poverty.

The same week that Yvette and I had met, Rosie also introduced us to Giles. South African by birth, Giles had been a property developer in London before moving to Sri Lanka in the mid-90s. With his old friend and now business partner, Viren, a Sri Lankan by birth but educated in Canada, Giles was developing the Ulpotha Sanctuary, an eco-tourism venture in the heart of the island, which was preparing to receive its first group of budding yogis for two-week retreats. ‘You have to come over,’ Giles was adamant. ‘You’ll love it.’

Giles’s advice came back to us and we sought refuge for a while in Sri Lanka. We arrived in the capital Colombo in November, shortly after a Tamil Tiger bombing in the city centre had destroyed parts of the Hilton, the World Trade Centre and surrounding office blocks. Luckily, the attack happened outside office hours. Viren described how shards of broken glass had flown across his office and been embedded like daggers in the opposite wall. One sliver had pierced the back of his chair.

Within hours of our arrival, Yvette was comparing the country

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to the island of her youth. 'It reminds me of Barbados when I was growing up,' she kept saying.

With a British mother and Bajan father, Yvette had been born and raised on the quintessential tropical island with swaying palms and white sand beaches, surrounded by a clear turquoise sea. Moving to London when she was 21, she endured the British climate for seven years before returning to Barbados, vowing never to subject herself to such miserable weather again. The Barbados Yvette knew as a child had largely disappeared. Recently rated as the fastest developing nation on earth, the island was enjoying a level of affluence and prosperity hitherto unknown in the Caribbean. The simplicity and charm that she now observed in Sri Lanka had given way to vulgar faux-Palladian villas, gated communities, traffic jams and crack-related crime. Although we were to spend many months there, and often weighed it up as a place to live, it was simply unaffordable. In those terms Sri Lanka was very different. We could live well, and relatively cheaply. Giles and Viren provided the perfect introduction and we spent memorable weeks taking trips to Ulpotha, down south to Galle and hanging with their friends in Colombo.

We stayed in Colombo with Giles and Pat, a Canadian recently divorced from her Sri Lankan husband but so smitten with the country that she had stayed. Her stunning spacious apartment overlooked the sea and railway just off Galle Road and formed the nexus for a floating population of intriguing people. There was Lalith, aka Leftie, who shared my interest in ecology; Amrik, a member of one of the country's political families, who shared Giles's passion for paragliding; Rukman, whose Galapita eco-lodge in the southeast of the island had a similar vision to Ulpotha. When we left Sri Lanka, after six weeks, for California, it was with considerable regret. Our

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overwhelming impressions were of smiling, friendly people and a stunningly beautiful island, perversely protected from the rapid changes seen in other parts of Asia by nearly 20 years of civil war.

Almost from the moment we met, Yvette and I started a seven-year conversation about where in the world to live. The decision centred on a few key places, focusing mainly on Barbados, California and Byron Bay in Australia. We made occasional forays into other ideas, from the Pyrenees and Morocco to South Africa and southern Italy, but these never lasted too long. Our reservations varied from the economic to the climatic, from the prevailing culture to the fact that, in the case of Australia, 'it's so bloody far away'.

As this seemingly endless discussion continued, Yvette found herself doing precisely what she had vowed never to do again – living in London. This was partly down to her wanting to sell the flat she owned, partly down to my inertia about leaving friends and family. London in the late 90s was a fun city to live in and, although we could not really afford it, we took full advantage of all that was on offer. Then, when it all got too much, something radical happened. I fell in love with a small cottage in Wales.

One bright Spring day in late March 1999, I was taking the train up to London from my father's house in Surrey, my eyes glued to the estate agent's details for Lower House, near the tiny village of Llanbadarn-y-Garreg. The train pulled into Staines and I watched as a man with a bicycle and trailer manoeuvred into the guard's van in the next carriage. He then wandered through and sat down opposite me.

'You thinking of moving to Wales?' he asked later, having seen the document I was studying so intently.

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‘Oh, dreaming of it really,’ I replied, looking up. ‘Why, is that where you live?’

‘No, but I have lots of friends down there. It’s a beautiful place.’

Minutes later, I discovered that Andy Langford knew my old boss from the film world, Herbie Girardet. But more importantly, he taught permaculture, a system and design philosophy for sustainable lifestyles.

‘Permaculture isn’t just about growing some of your own food,’ Andy explained. ‘It’s a complete philosophy, covering every aspect of sustainable living. I’m teaching a course up at the Findhorn community in Scotland later this year. If you do buy the property, maybe you should come and join us?’

It sounded like a good idea. In a sense, this serendipitous meeting on the train changed my life. It was there and then that I resolved to move to Wales and start practising permaculture.

We spent the next four years living at Lower House, two winters of which we escaped to Barbados. Despite some reluctance, Yvette enjoyed the life we had there, especially during those rare moments when the sun shone. The location was stunning, the house perched on a south-facing hillside on the edge of the Edw Valley, about 12 miles west of Hay-on-Wye. Perfect rainbows would span the valley, dropping into green pastures like divine reflections. In the late summer of 2000, we were married in the small parish church, becoming the second couple in a hundred years to do so. For the next three years, we grew vegetables, walked the hills, foraged for wild mushrooms, planted fruit trees and Yvette kept bees.

Our time in Wales was productive for both of us. I was able to explore my interest in ecological building, constructing a straw-bale house rendered with lime mortar, which served as a studio for Yvette

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and an office for me. Yvette started a collection of work, developing her own distinctive style, while I researched and wrote *Rising Tides*, a history of ecological thought.

Then, on Boxing Day 2000, Yvette announced that she was pregnant. Sholto was born on 5 September, three weeks late and after 42 hours of labour. Like every couple with their first baby, our lives changed from that moment. Six days later, 10 fanatics flew two commercial airliners into the World Trade Center in New York, and the whole world changed forever. The global events that followed only fuelled the desire for a new life overseas, somewhere a bit out on a limb.

Living on a Welsh hillside, with a small baby, 20 minutes' drive from the nearest pint of milk, with torrential rain and gale force winds pounding the doors and windows, proved quite a challenge, especially for my Caribbean wife. We rented our house to Zoe, an ex-groupie to a Swedish punk band and custodian to a menagerie of gerbils, then flew to Barbados and rented a flat for four months.