

Woodlands Adventure – Summer 2009

It was 6.45 am. Rain was lashing against the windows of Cleeve House as I rushed about with tea things. Checking the writing on my hand for the last minute things I had to do – fill up water bottles, get my top out of the dryer, get the batteries out of the charger – Dave arrived.

‘Morning!’ I beamed at him.

He helped prepare the tea and very soon Becky and Danny were at the door, full of enthusiasm and anticipation.

‘Hello lovey!’ Big hugs were exchanged.

‘Are you excited?’

‘I’m so excited!’

James and Rachel followed shortly, then Jeremy, Nigel and Tim. Matt arrived to many a hug and handshake, Mark and Steve showed up, and soon the Tea Room was full of an excited crowd of us, all kitted out in waterproofwear and clumpy great walking boots. There was a great deal of army camouflage in the room.

Mugs of tea in hands, we stood around glowing with a mix of pride and uncertainty of what we were about to do.

‘How many are we altogether Matt?’

‘16 in total, the rest will meet us there.’

‘What’s the weather forecast?’

‘Heavy downpours,’ Matt grinned, ‘which will make it a much more real experience.’ After a brief cup of tea, a few trips to the loo and some quick organisation of cars, we piled in the various vehicles, with our massive rucksacks stacked in Danny’s van, and set off to Wales.

Two hours later – after driving through rain so fierce that it was hard to see the road – we pulled in outside the Angel Pub in Ystradfellte, where Julian, Sarah, Nick and Isabel were waiting. Nick was sporting an impressive poncho-cowboy hat combination, Isabel was hugging everyone excitedly through the rain, and a few introductions were made. Most of us knew each other from various Aikido events, except for Sarah, Matt’s doctor, who had never done Aikido but had asked if she could come along too.

We gathered around Matt’s car as he distributed heavy little cardboard ration packs, the foil-sealed and plastic wrapped contents of which were investigated with fascination.

‘Oh I love finding out what I’ve got.’

‘Chicken and mushroom casserole?’

‘I’ve got beans and burgers.’

‘Is it all one meal?’

‘No that should be three meals in there, plus snacks.’

‘Oh look, energy sweets.’

‘Hey I don’t have them.’

‘But you’ve got Kendall mint cake.’

‘So I have.’

‘Anyone want my coffee packets?’

The items were squeezed into our already heavy packs, and we gathered under the semi-shelter of a tree as Matt gave us the briefing for the weekend.

‘The purpose of this trip is two-fold,’ he began, ‘firstly it’s to get back to nature, to just be one with the natural environment, to shake off normal concerns and worries and the stuff of everyday life. You are all carrying only what you need to survive – well unless some of you have brought hairdryers or mirrors or something – and it’s a real return to a simpler way of life.

‘Secondly, it will be a chance to get a deeper understanding of Aikido, in terms of technique, but also the basic principles of blending with what’s around you and with each other, and helping each other grow in body, mind and spirit.’

We sat in our circle around Matt, taking in the details as the rain dripped around us. It got just a little bit frightening when he outlined the procedure for accident or injury, and explained that the first aid kit was in the top pocket of his rucksack, in case anything happened to him, that James is next in command if anything happened to him, that Sarah is a doctor and Danny is a fireman, and the nearest hospital is in Merthyr.

He grinned a little as he outlined the ‘comfort – stretch – panic cycle’ and assured us that we would all be taken out of our comfort zone, and stretched, but hopefully not too far into the panic zone.

Scary bits out the way, he split us into two groups, with all the girls and three lads in *Kokyu*, and the rest of the guys in *Awase*. This was to give the feminine team the more masculine powerful yang identity of moving forward with energy, while the team of lads could work on their feminine blending yin qualities. We were also paired into buddies, so that at all times we would know the whereabouts and condition of our partners.

‘Right then, everyone find your bearing on the map, and I need two navigators from each team to come up and I will tell you the bearings we want to get to, and you will plan a route and take your teams there.’

Clutching maps in ziplock bags, our navigators pointed us in the right direction, we helped each other heave our massive packs onto our backs, buckled up the support straps and set off.

Our first challenge was about two metres in when a very narrow kissing gate provided a huge obstacle to squeeze through with our added thirty pounds, but that conquered, we marched on up the stony slippery track into the rainy Breckon hills.

Rachel and I were beaming with happiness.

‘You alright buddy?’

‘Yeah, are you alright buddy?’

The path was wide enough to walk in pairs and cheerful chatter drifted through the drippy wet air, as the swollen muddy torrents of the river Neath churned down beside us. Lush green ferns glistened among the sharp granite slopes of the gorge, our boots crunched and splashed in the rocky mud, and we breathed in the fresh fertile purity of our leafy surroundings.

Very soon there was a small rest, where carefully arranged protective waterproof layers were discarded in favour of bare arms and necks to cool down a bit, and people found themselves long solid sticks for walking, which we would need as *Jos* for the weapons training.

The path grew narrow and steep, and after nearly an hour we reached the thunderous roar of the forty foot high Sgwd Gwladu, the "Lady Falls". Packs off, we gratefully rested a minute or two.

‘It’s a bit like that river in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,’ said Mark.

‘Yeah it is a bit, all churny and brown.’

‘I wouldn’t like to fall in there though.’

Our bemused wonderings were interrupted by Matt saying, ‘right, you all have your swimming shorts?’

A few weeks earlier, in a little chat after a Monday night Aikido class, Matt had outlined the kit we would need for this weekend, which included something we were comfortable going in the water with.

‘Shorts, swimming suit....’

‘Dinghy,’ said Mark.

We giggled so much we missed the rest of the briefing.

Now, no dinghy in sight, eyes wide at the churning water, our chilled and happy mood sharpened into slightly fearful anticipation. The girls rushed off to a secluded space to get changed, and when we returned, in various degrees of discomfort about our attire, the lads were waiting at the edge of the river, with the thundering downpour of the waterfall ahead. We huddled about, half naked and nervous, as Matt shouted above the roar that he had done a reccy of this part and there was a deep bit that you could swim through to reach the falls, and then stand up under the pouring waterfall. We followed him in to the shallow bit, the freezing water painful around our warm ankles, then watched as he dived in and front crawled to the falls, stood up, pushed his hair out of his eyes and swam back.

‘Yeah it’s safe,’ he shouted, and one by one, like a row of pale pink penguins, we all dived in and swam out to the rocks. Well almost all of us, because after Becky and Rachel, both far tougher and water-happy women than me, had slightly uncertain moments half way through the deep churning plunge-pool, I decided my talents would be best put to use taking pictures and holding towels for people. Once Matt was out though, he handed me his water shoes, and with the help of Isabel – ‘stay right near me, please!’ – I managed to get in the deep end and do a bit of backstroke. It was amazing how cold it suddenly wasn’t when you were fully immersed.

A few people stood right under the falls, letting the powerful torrents pound against their shoulders, before swimming back and gratefully changing into dry clothes, as passers by shook their dumbfounded heads at us murmuring, ‘nutters.’

Some happy picnickers had settled in our ‘ladies changing room’ so we huddled, shivering, behind a fortunately placed boulder to get back into hiking gear and boots.

Exhilarated and aglow from our wild swim, it was time to warm up with our first session of Aikido *Tai Jitsu*. The flat grassy clearing at the top of the falls proved an excellent *dojo* – ‘but stay away from the edge, guys!’

Instead of focusing on technique, the lesson was about the basic principle of blending, and we paired up to practice striking and avoiding each other, stepping deftly off the line of a variety of attacks.

I was exhausted, my eyes were closing and a buzzy fuzzing dizziness swarmed through my brain. Isabel was standing there in front of me, in perfect *hanmi*, focused and ready, looking at me expectantly.

‘Oh it’s my turn.’

‘Yep,’ she nodded gravely

‘Um, is it -?’

‘You attack me.’

‘Right.’

I grabbed her left wrist.

‘No it’s *katedori*,’ she said, indicating her shoulder.

‘Oh, of course.’

I stumbled through the move, she guided me all the way through it – ‘Now left foot back, no the other way, ok, and, no you’ve got the wrist wrong, it’s like - ’

‘*Ayame!*’ Matt shouted from the other side of the clearing.

‘Oh thank God,’ I mumbled, and we disentangled from our messy position, bowed to each other quickly and stood to watch the next bit.

He was demonstrating on Becky, ‘- and then this foot comes round, and you’re off the line, then you grab the elbow like this ...’

I was finding it so hard to concentrate. My ears kept popping and unpoping from their surprised submergence under the water, and the gushing rushing of the waterfall seemed to be coming from alternate directions. The clearing was so green and lush, the rain had stopped and the sun sparkled through the leafy canopy, emitting from the earth a rich fertile warmth. I breathed in deeply to ground my dizzy mind, and drank in the serene beauty of the abundant dripping foliage to fuel my spaced out head with some energy.

This was the real challenge for me, to be pushed to the limit physically, and then have to deal with a mental challenge as well.

By the time Matt said the final *ayame*, everyone seemed quite grateful that it was time to gather happily in clusters for lunch. Little gas stoves and pans emerged from our packs, and packets of high energy meals were quickly cooked, eaten and washed up in the river.

By now everyone had managed to secure a sturdy *Jo* from saplings by the path, and Julian, seeing that I didn’t have one, quickly selected a sapling for me.

‘This one alright?’ he asked, hacking a *Jo*-shaped bit of woodland out for me.

‘Absolutely, thank you so much.’

Keen to keep the pace up, our break lasted just over twenty minutes, and Matt gathered us quickly for the next round of navigation.

‘When I did the reccy of the next bit in March,’ he began, ‘the path was clear and it was fine. But there’s been a lot of rain since then.’

A slight murmur of uncertainty rippled through the group.

‘So we’re going to go as far as we can, but it might mean we stop and turn back if it’s too dangerous.’

Rachel and I were up to navigate this bit, and with Rachel’s expert compass skills it became clear that the only track available was the one represented by a little dashed black line on the map, that seemed to be running straight through the middle of the river.

‘Right, Kokyu, it’s this way,’ she announced, and we trooped off along the stony track. Any chatting soon diminished as the track became increasingly narrow and rocky, and we had to help each other across gaps, holes and slippery steep bits. With near vertical rocky outcrops up on the right, and a torrent of brown river down on the left, the track suddenly stopped, and I thought we had gone the wrong way. Matt went up ahead and looked at the river for a long time.

When he came back he said, ‘We’re going to do a river crossing here.’

‘What’s that?’ I didn’t quite understand. Surely there would a bridge, no?

‘I’ll go first to check,’ Matt was saying, ‘and once I’m at the other side you can follow on.’ He gave quite a detailed safety briefing, explaining that we were never to do this without an experienced instructor. I began to realise that he wasn’t even joking, we were going to just walk straight through it. The fear fully kicked in when he explained that if we lost our balance, we should fall over onto our backs, and spreadeagle our arms and legs. ‘You wont go too far like that,’ he said, and began walking into the river.

We looked at each other questioningly.

‘What, walk through it?’

‘You have waterproof boots right?’

‘Yeah but just to the ankles’

‘Wait, look how deep it is!’

Matt had reached half way across, and the water was way over his ankles. As he made his way further, cautiously leaning against his *Jo*, the water swirled over his knees and continued rising almost up to his waist. I had started to roll up my trousers but at that point acquiesced to the fact that we would all just get soaked. He seemed to be through the deepest bit, and striding out to the other side he shouted over to follow, using our *Jos* as support like a third leg.

Rachel was first in line, and with her *Jo* not especially up to the job, Matt threw his across the river for her to catch. Rachel is five foot five, and having watched Matt struggle in the deep bit I was very concerned for my buddy. Realising I wouldn’t be much help, and massively afraid myself, I urged Julian to go ahead and stay near her during the scary bit. She gradually waded through, carefully keeping balance with her heavy pack staying centred. Matt stayed in the deep end, helping Rachel through, while a few people overtook me standing frightened on the bank. Once Rachel was across, I could put it off no longer. My wonderfully waterproof boots went in, I walked confident and focused, as each step took my feet further in, among the slippery rocks, brown tumbling water filling my boots and cascading past my knees. The deep bit came quite suddenly, Matt up ahead was saying ‘Place the *Jo*, lean on it and step.’ I had been doing this fine, feeling around with the *Jo* to wedge it between rocks as I moved, until I could

feel the great torrent of water growing in strength so that when I tried to place my Jo it just got swept back up by the current.

‘I can’t - ’

‘Yes you can Mireya, just trust the Jo.’

‘Trust the Jo,’ I repeated to myself, staring into the water rushing and tumbling around my legs, my trembly hands gripping the Jo.

‘I can’t move my feet, Matt, there’s, there’s- ’

It was hard to express the fact that the safe little shuffly steps I had employed so far along the invisible rocky riverbed would not work here as there seemed to be a huge boulder under the water in front. I would have to raise my foot way over it, essentially standing on one leg, in a raging river, with 25kg on my back. How did Rach do this bit?

Matt came to help. His arm was solid and safe and I clung to it through the deep bit, till I emerged, trembling, to join the others on the bank. We were all a little pale and traumatised; Rach was shaking her head saying, ‘I didn’t like that.’

Isabel was grinning, chatting, wringing the river out of her socks.

I was about to do the same, but my hands were a little shaky and I just wanted to sit very still.

‘Matt, will we be doing this again?’

‘Yeah, don’t dry off your shoes just yet,’ he said, ‘there’s a good chance that’s not the last of it.’

Continuing on, shaken, but all ok, the track disappeared again after about five minutes. We looked at the river, then at Matt.

‘Ok, we’re going in again.’

Just before heading in, he turned to Danny, the tall, tough, fireman of the group.

‘Danny, you go about ten metres downstream ready to catch any things or people that fall in.’

My pack has a fat comfy strap buckled across the waist and a smaller one across the chest. I undid both, so that if I fell in I could easily slip out of the shoulder straps and escape the heavy bulk, and lined up behind everyone else on the bank. I was really scared.

‘Where’s your dinghy now, Mark?’ asked Rach, only half joking.

This stretch of the river was faster and deeper than the first. And since we were crossing from the other direction, the glare and flash of the sun was far more intense on the surface of the water. Where we could vaguely see the rocks before, now was just a blinding flashy moving sheet of light. When I got to the bit where the water was half way up my thighs, I froze. I didn’t trust the Jo, I didn’t trust my feet, I didn’t trust my balance. I was so nervous and shaky I didn’t want to move. The river kept pouring past my legs, rippling my trousers into me. I gripped my Jo firmly, as it stayed wedged between rocks and I did not move. It crossed my mind, like a small frightened animal, that if I just stood really still there it would be ok. If I waited long enough the water would stop, or at least slow down a bit, like traffic does, and I would be fine. It was one of the most frightening things to realise that it was never going to stop. That the river had always flowed there, will continue always flow there, was fuelled by months of rain

running down the sides of the valley and converging into one twisting churning mass of water, and would never stop, no matter how much I willed it to, paid it, cried at it or bribed it. It was an incredibly terrifying ruthless force. That thought frightened me even more and I stood there shaking my head numbly.

‘Matt I can’t.’

I was nearly crying. He came and I clutched hold of his arms, stepping gradually, fearfully through. So relieved to be out of the deep bit, my knees almost collapsed in the shallow bit, so I concentrated hard, ‘Place the Jo, lean on it, step,’ until the strong arms of Nigel and Nick helped me onto the bank.

‘That was really scary,’ I said, breathing deeply, ‘go, go and help Rach.’

By the time the last of us had crossed, Rach and I were still very shaken.

‘I’m glad we did that,’ I said, chatting nervously through the trauma, ‘I mean I wouldn’t have ever chosen to do it but its one of those things you can be proud of having done, you know?’

‘I’m not there yet,’ she said, shaking her head, ‘not looking back at it yet, still living it. It’s getting to the point where, seriously, I’m not sure I want to do this anymore.’

I tried to be encouraging, but I was too shaken myself.

My heart sank when we stopped again, at a much wider stretch of river. I was wondering at which point Matt would say ok, it’s too dangerous we’ll have to go back. But the further we were going, the worse it would be to return.

This one was deeper and faster still, and as we waited our turns on the bank, Sarah said, ‘do you hear that?’

‘What?’

‘Sounds like thunder.’

We listened above the swoosh of churning river and sure enough, there were occasional rumbles of pounding thunder echoing through the valley. Ignoring them, we set very wet foot back into the river, for a third crossing made more interesting by Nick’s pack shedding half its contents into the river, which many hands grappled about in the water to retrieve. I tied my camera to my pack-strap, so I could get some shots mid-river, and we waded on through and up on to the bank.

Walking on from here, I realised suddenly how exhausted I was. Carrying the pack uphill for that long is one knacker thing, but to be scared out of your mind and recover three times is fairly exhausting work.

Rach was looking really upset, and the group had lost its chatty cheerful banter as we trudged drippily on, our waterproof boots squelchily retaining sloshing amounts of river.

The fourth crossing was met with little comment, as we simply followed Matt back in to the river. It was made manageable by a fortuitously fallen tree, the branches of which served as a slippery green handrail to edge along with. There was an incredibly deep bit, up to the waist for the first time, the narrowness of which made the flow even faster, and without the tree would have been impossible for most of us.

Shortly after the last crossing, the path curved round another slippery rocky outcrop and Nigel said, ‘Ah there’s your thunder.’

A huge white waterfall was crashing out of the valley. Spray and mist filled the air as we got closer, and packs off, we clambered over to get as close as we could to the falls.

‘This is where any bit of us that’s still dry gets wet,’ said Steve, and indeed the moisture fell like fine rain all around us among the deafening booming of the falls.

‘Look there’s a rainbow.’

‘What?’

‘A RAINBOW!’

‘Where?’

‘No its AROUND you.’

‘Around me?’

‘Yeah it’s a complete circle – hold on stay right there, who has a camera?’

‘Oh wow.’

‘Look at that.’

‘Oh it’s so beautiful.’

‘Here, can you take one of us together?’

Finally we could relax a little, and after some waterfalic frolickry, we moved away from the crashing spray. With a smile and a sigh that signalled the worst of it was over, Matt got us to sit down in a circle on a grassy bank. He busily collected small branches for us as we untied our laces to pour water out onto the bank and wring out our socks.

‘Ok, everyone get your knives out.’

I scurried over to Tim, who had earlier agreed to lend me his little knife. Wielding the correct fixed-handled weapon, he passed a tiny pocket knife to me. ‘Thanks,’ I whispered and went back to my place.

Matt demonstrated different techniques for cutting the sticks into points and in half, and (for my part at last massively relieved to have a relatively straightforward task) we set to work. I was able to make a surprising impact with the tiny knife and was soon on the way to two nicely sharpened tent pegs, actually faster than Nick, struggling next to me with his massive machete monster of weaponry. Tim, with his pegs completed in minutes, came over with his real knife for me to use, and helped me complete my project without slicing my fingers off.

All quite pleased with our efforts, and so occupied by our handywork that we had almost forgotten we were drenched to the bone, Matt concluded the craftwork, we wedged our new biodegradable pegs into our packs and by way of introduction to the next chapter of our adventure, he said, ‘We have a decision to make now.’

We sat up straight, paying close attention all of a sudden as just a touch of that earlier fear tingled in the air.

‘And to help us make it, I’m going to tell you a little story.

‘The Battle of 300 happened over three days during the second Persian invasion of Greece. It took place on a beach with high cliffs to one side, and the sea to the other, so there was only one way in. The Greeks had to protect this pass, to stop the Persians getting into Greece, so Leonidas, the army general, rounded up 300 men who would do the job. It was pretty inevitable they would die, so he only took men who had brothers

or sons who could continue the family line. One of the women asked why their men were being chosen, and Leonidas said, 'I'm choosing the men because of one thing, and that is the strength of the women in their families.'

'So these three hundred went to fill the beach, to protect all of Greece from the invasion, and the battle lasted for three days; they fought day and night, killing thousands of the Persians. Eventually though, one of the Spartans betrayed them because he knew about this tiny goat track up over the cliff. The Persians came down secretly that way and got them from both sides and eventually the Greeks lost.'

We were gripped by the story, worried for the Greeks, their wives and families, and as Matt drew to its conclusion, we wondered warily what the connection with us would be.

Grinning ambiguously, he said, 'And that's the similarity with us here. There's only two ways out of here. One is-' he glanced down stream, 'back the way we came, through four river crossings...' (there was a perceptible inner shaking of heads to this option) '...or,' he added optimistically, looking up the near vertical mass of rock, tree and mud to the sky, 'there is a very narrow dangerous goat track that leads up over the cliff.'

A far more positive atmosphere greeted that option.

'The thing is, and that's why we all have to be in agreement on this, it's really steep and slippery, so the only way we can do it is if the ladies go on their own, without packs, and five of us guys will have to go twice, to pack mule them up.'

'Oh my God yes PLEASE!' thought Rach and Becky and Isabel and Sarah and me, but dared not say anything as we looked at the lads, praying they would agree.

Rach and I almost cried when they said yes. It was a beautiful awe-inspiring moment as the men of the group offered to make the perilous journey to protect the ladies from danger.

Matt, Danny, James, David and Tim were our heroes, battling the steep wet slopes, clinging for dear life to roots, twigs and mossy bits of rock as they trusted their tough boots on the slippery slopes. We ladies climbed carefully up unencumbered, still struggling at bits where there was nothing to hold on to but mud. Eventually the treacherous path steadied out onto a grassy plateau, where we waited among lush green ferns as the lads deposited our packs, took a deep breath and scrambled down again to retrieve their own.

Isabel and Becks, not wasting a minute, started planning Kokyu's skit for the evening.

'Ok, so what if there's a dragon,'

'Yeah a Welsh dragon,'

'A Welsh Water dragon!'

'But what will the boys do?'

'Oh I know - '

They excitedly discussed the plan in secretive whispers, occasionally glancing over and giggling at members of Awase.

The lads' second journey up the slope was taking longer than the first, and I began to get a little worried. If we had struggled to negotiate the slopes how much scarier would it be with a massive bulky pack weighing down and unbalancing you? I tried hard not to

think of what would happen if one of our brave lads had lost his footing, but couldn't help thinking that for all five to be held up something must have happened.

Eventually they appeared, breathless and mud-smearred, over the mossy ledge, and hoisted the packs gratefully among the ferns, unable to hide the proud manly sense of saviourism they had just demonstrated to us ladies.

By now it was close to dinner time. Although the path was fantastically free from waist high rivers to cross, a certain amount of exhaustion was kicking in. Our line of be-packed travellers snaked through dense woodland on paths flanked by ferns and forest flowers, over soft beds of cushiony pine needles and under spiky branches adorned delicately with moistly hanging moss. The evening sun slanted in between dark trunks and every now and then the traveller in front would call 'mind your face,' as a springy branch came slapping back across their pack towards you.

As the path opened out onto a marshy field, we trudged through clumps of spiky reeds full of fat orange slugs, an abundance of sheep poo and a frog.

The adventures in the river had lost us about an hour and a half, so instead of completing the day's hike further into the hills, we set up camp where we were, as there was a lot to get done by nightfall.

Not everyone managed the intricate knot work that Matt demonstrated on our guy ropes, but either way, soon the woods were smattered with a collection of our various types and shades of basha, with strings criss-crossing in every direction. We ladies chose a relatively flat area to pitch our little homes next to each other, and Sarah and I rather cunningly used natural grooves in the forest floor to clear out into roll-mat sized trenches. Tim began the elaborate process of securing his pink and blue hammock between two trees, and Matt went round helping people with knots.

Shelters up, the wonderfully liberating process of changing into dry clothes could begin. Taking my heavy soaking boots off, I peeled off dripping wet socks to reveal pale wrinkled cold feet, which I dried off as best I could. I prised my carefully sealed plastic bag of clothes out of my soaking bag and rejoiced in the soft clean dryness of new top and trousers, and the blissful luxury of dry socks. The guy ropes served as handy washing lines for our soiled and soaking items, and boots were placed upside down on sticks to dry.

A sheltered spot under an oak with a view across the valley was chosen for dinner. The pastures to the horizon were ablaze with the golden light of the setting sun, clusters of trees shimmered brilliantly in the soft glow as a buzzard circled in the pale blue sky and white flecks of sheep grazed in the fields miles away.

I was so grateful for dinner. As I tore the foil wrapping and scooped out sporkfuls of steaming chicken stew from my boil-in-the-bag, I felt the glorious heat of its contents warm my shivering body, and thought happily of the decreasing weight of my bag. Julian was sitting in the smoke-path of my little fire and took offence at my paraffin hexiblock still smoking away as the water bubbled.

'Sorry I don't know how to turn it off,' I said, as he moved his far more sensible gas stove away from me, choking on my fumes. I considered tipping the water over the flames, but was saving the water preciously for the sachet of white tea powder. It was not good tea, but it was so beautifully hot and sweet, with just a slight paraffiny aftertaste. As the flames from our little fires died out, evening began to close in, and with it a million bitey little midges. Jeremy wore his mosquito net over his face like a

ceremonial veil, and the rest of us gratefully passed Nick's insect repellent spray around.

Our evening Aiki lesson made use of the last of the daylight, and we spun, *skii*ed and struck with our Jos the six count *kata* into the hazy evening air while the midges swarmed about our faces like locusts, biting and biting and chewing us up alive. I tied my hoodie so tight around my face that only my eyes were exposed, but they still got me. Even Nigel, the chilled out calm zen one who I was partnered with for the *awase*, was distracted by their bityness, irritatedly flicking them out of his eyes between *skis*. To finish, we closed round for a little reflective chat in which Matt congratulated Sarah who, helped by Becky and Isabel, had managed to get the whole *kata* by the end of the session. Someone passed round some chocolate which was gratefully received and which Jeremy tried unsuccessfully to eat through his mosquito face-net.

Ten minutes were allowed for collecting sticks – delegated by size amongst the teams – and splitting off in all directions, we emerged from the woods with armfuls of twigs and logs for the campfire. Matt had made a circle of stones from the stream, and showed us how to make a dry surface of small sticks on which to construct the fire from kindling and wood chips. Sitting around on logs and rollmats – apart from Tim who had his clever little camping stool – we watched as smoke rose from the collection of twigs, then flames suddenly flickered to life, spreading through and devouring them as Matt added the larger sticks.

I was glad that it was taking a while for the fire to start, because the scariest bit of the day was still to come. Fortunately James, like a saviour of all things nerve-wracking, had brought a 6 litre box of wine which Rach was busy filling our metal camping mugs with, so that when it was time to perform our sketches, the wine was doing its work, and, perhaps I was biased, but it seemed that much hilarity was produced.

David rather keenly volunteered Kokyu to go first, and we took our places on the 'stage', a clear patch near the gate, illuminated vaguely by Tim's fabulous gas lantern.

The story - narrated by me in a surprisingly alcohol-inspired Welsh accent – was of a group of friends who had gone for a walk in the Welsh woodlands, dancing and singing in the rain the 6 count *kata* out of sheer delight. This was performed expertly (if a little gigglingly) by Becky, Isabel, Rach and Sarah, with umbrellas, to the tune of 'singing in the rain.' Obliviously frolicking, they didn't notice the river rising around them, trapping the friends on a rock, as they squealed frightenedly that they 'couldn't face another river crossing!' At this point the wonderful Welsh Water Dragon – an expert configuration of Nick, Dave and Tim under a green basha – came to rescue the ladies, amid much giggly squealing laughter.

We sat back down by the fire, to much applause and appreciation from the Awase group. Glad it was over, and surprised by how much we had enjoyed it, we finally, happily settled into our much missed comfort zone.

The Awase boys reluctantly got up to prepare for their play, and disappeared down the path into the dark as Steve took his place by the fire to tell us the intriguing story of the 300 warriors on the beach at Sparta.

With some ingenious choreography, the men running to attack each other disappeared to the left and reappeared to the right, attacking again in one continuous flow of Greek soldiers.

We fell about laughing, as they concluded with their burly song and dance to ‘Always look on the bright side of life,’ with much manly grunting and imaginary tankard wielding. Amid our delighted applause, the lads rejoined the circle by the fire. Matt grinned as he brought out a bottle of wine and began to weigh up a winner, outlining the criteria that both teams had tried to fulfil. ‘Well the ladies team – sorry I mean Kokyu – had comedy, had singing and dancing...’

‘And fancy dress!’

‘Yes, good use of the basha there... and the Awase team, yes, some fancy dress, not as much comedy, but you did manage to crowbar the song and dance in...’

He drew out the analysis amid much suspense, before conceding the inevitable, that Kokyu had won.

‘Yey, more wine!’ we laughed, and tin cups were again filled.

James and Matt fuelled the fire with more logs, a few more litres of wine were produced, and Nigel, not a red wine fan, enjoyed an energising muesli bar. We arranged socks and shoes on stones by the fire to dry, and enjoyed the warmth of the high flames shooting bright little sparks upward.

Staring up at the night sky, Matt began an explanation of how to find the North Star.

‘You see the Big Dipper, right there... well, follow that line of the last star, and if you look just below it -’

‘Oh wow!’ the whole group burst into an exclamation of delight, ‘Did you see that?’

‘Yeah, a shooting star!’

A buzz of happy glowy warmth spread over the group with the specialness of the shared experience.

As the evening drew on, and the wine flowed, the conversation around our corner of the fire included an explanation from Danny and Dave of certain unusual terms to Becky, amid much shocked gasps of understanding.

‘But there’s a character in Red Dwarf called Rimmer!’

‘So there is.’

Matt managed to steer the conversation to a slightly nobler note with a call for toasts. With tin mugs charged, we each offered a toast of gratitude.

‘A toast to the brave men who carried the packs for the ladies’

‘A toast to Matt, who put this whole weekend together’

‘A toast to our friends who couldn’t make it this time.’

‘To O’Sensei, without who, none of us would be here...’

We reflected on the day. Rach said, ‘Yeah that steep goat track wasn’t that bad.’

James laughed, ‘Wasn’t that bad, she said, having left me to carry two packs up it!’

‘Yeah Becks, what is in your pack?’ asked Dave.

‘We all steered clear of your one, it’s so heavy!’

‘Not as heavy as James’s, with all that wine!’

‘Yeah thank you for that James.’

By about midnight, people began to think about the 6am start in the morning. Those of us that had become quite cosy by the fire decided to bring our sleeping bags up from the basha wood and sleep by the fire while the rest of the group settled into their little shelters. Rach, James, Becks and I gathered up all our nighttime accoutrements – head torch, woolly hat, water, midnight munchies - and arranged our roll mats as close to the fire as possible, zipping ourselves snugly into sleeping bags. James needed a little assistance from Becks and Rach, who caterpillar-like in their sleeping bags, wriggled over to help tuck him in to his tricky hooded ensemble, before giggling back to their mats.

‘Goodnight,’ we called to each other through muffled layers, over the crackle of the fire and delicate burble of the stream.

I woke up several times in the night, freezing icily on my own. At about 2am James and Rach were restocking the fire, and I sat up dazily to glean as much of the glorious new warmth from the flames as I could before curling back up to try and sleep. At about 3 am I woke again freezing, and at a loss for how to warm up, ate a banana and some of my precious stash of dairy milk, at 4 am Becks woke up to discover her lovely fluffy warm pink socks that had been drying by the fire had been burnt through, and by 5.30 when alarm clocks started going off no-one was in a mood to get up. Except for Becks, who had been up since five, had washed, dressed and made coffee for Danny back in basha land.

One by one people emerged from the woods, woolly hats and hoods on, blinking sleepily at the morning sun.

‘Morning.’

‘You sleep alright?’

‘Not too bad.’

‘Oh I was so cold.’

‘What was all that giggling in the middle of the night?’

‘Oh Beck’s socks were burnt through.’

‘How was your hammock?’

‘Quite comfortable actually.’

‘How was the fire?’

‘Wasn’t as warm as you’d’ve thought actually.’

‘Hey thanks for that piggy back ride, my shoes were just too soaked to put back on.’

‘Oh look, Matt’s waiting up there.’

Gathering at the top of the field, we rolled out our mats and sat facing the rising sun. Mark had nothing to sit on so we perched at either end of my mat, keeping a good aura’s distance. Droplets of shimmering dew glistened on the green spikes of grass, birds sang in the trees behind us, and the sun poured over the horizon of silhouetted oak trees, warm and bright against our sleepy faces.

‘We are so fortunate to have this as our venue for meditation this morning,’ said Matt, leaning on his Jo to stare in awe at the view. He explained how to sit straight, as if cords

running up our spines connected us to the sky, how to breathe circularly, and empty our minds for the sixteen minutes.

Filling our lungs with the fresh morning air, we breathed still and quietly in the sun. The energy from the earth flowed through our bodies, and a peaceful tranquillity settled over the group. I felt the solid ground beneath us, the gently rustling trees around us and the vast sky stretching away far above.

It was incredibly peaceful.

Gently woken from our various trances by a little alarm, we gradually stirred back to wakefulness, smiling at each other serenely.

Clasping our Jos purposefully, we began the pre-breakfast Aiki lesson, thrusting and *haso*-ing the 13 count *kata* into the sparkly air, working up a healthy appetite for breakfast.

The brook bubbled beside our camp, the sun shone through our little plumes of steam, as we enjoyed more boil-in-the-bag culinary wonders and some much appreciated coffee from Tim's coffee maker.

Pots were washed in the glistening water, and the fire was put out. The charcoals were scooped up and deposited in the stream, and the little charred patch of ground was covered with grass. It was as if we had never been there. Bashas were dismantled with similar care, leaving no trace of our trampling, and we would have left the spot entirely undetected if the farmer hadn't shown up as we were packing away.

He was very friendly, but made the valid point that one of us had left a gate open, and that if we wanted to camp on farmland it would be best to get permission, because we didn't want a herd of cattle wandering through our campsite in the night.

With much apology from us, and happy wellwishing from the farmer, we continued the adventure into the hills. Our packs were much happily lighter, and our bottles were refilled rather dubiously from the stream. Becks had arranged plastic bags cleverly around her feet, inside her wet boots, an inventive idea that I copied gratefully.

Having not completed the route the night before, we still had a lot of ground to cover, but the mood was buoyant, the sun was shining and the bright green of the fields sloped magically away to the mysterious deep valleys into which we gradually headed. Blackberries hung sporadically over the tracks, and any remaining packets of sweets were happily passed along the line as we walked.

'Right,' Matt said, pausing in the middle of a path. 'In 30 seconds, I'm going to pick someone to give me a 6 digit reference of where we are.'

Scrabbling around for maps and quickly consulting with our buddies, we pored over the faded bits of paper whispering numbers to each other.

'But look that's where we turned off -'

'No but you see the stream?'

'Oh yeah, and there's the bridge...'

Matt stood up and looked around the group.

'Becks, what's the grid reference.'

'895 903,' said Becky confidently.

‘Spot on,’ said Matt, ‘that’s exactly right. Anyone else?’

No-one said anything.

‘I think we all agree with that, Sensei.’

‘Fair enough,’ he laughed, ‘Can I have the next navigators please?’

The sun continued to stream down on our backs as we tramped on over the gritty path. Pains were starting to spread through my shoulders, and I tightened my waist buckle to try to spread out the weight of the pack.

‘Look, you can move the straps to the side a bit,’ offered David, ‘it puts the weight on different muscles.’

‘Oh so it does, it’s a completely new pain.’

A spiky pine tree grove served as the site for our last Aiki lesson. We practiced *Jo randori* in threes among pole-like green trunks stretching up to the sky. The uneven terrain, obtruding roots and low spiking branches made the lesson especially adventurous. And additionally exhausting.

Hoisting packs back on, we continued downhill, and eventually the trickly little streams criss-crossing the track met with larger tributaries which joined gushingly to the main river. Following the narrow tracks high above the gorge, we single filed through the ferny forest down into the valley until we reached another powerful thundering waterfall. Energetic adventurous ones whipped off layers and jumped in the river again, while those of us who needed it were just grateful for a few minutes to sit down. Matt was away through the plunge pool, swimming out to stand under the falls again, while a passing photographer quickly set up his tripod to capture the bizarre scene.

‘It’s surprising how many people drown just here,’ he said to me, clicking away.

‘Right, I don’t think I’ll mention that to them until they’re out,’ I said, clicking away myself.

Framed by branches of luminous green maple leaves, the milky tumbling falls made a perfect backdrop for posey photos, and we had time to take a few while the swimmers got changed.

The last part of the journey was a long, fast downhill hike. At some parts the pace was so intense that I was almost running to keep up. A fascinating conversation about the purpose of life, between Nigel, Mark, Becky and me had blossomed among the ferny embrace of the path, but with the speedy pace and narrow track it dissipated into the trees. In the silent trudging, all I could see was the next few paces of track, and the steady swing of Jeremy’s red and black backpack in front. My feet instinctively followed his tracks, finding the same safe surfaces of rock and root, as the pain from the backpack burnt into my shoulders.

We passed more picturesque waterfalls, like glimpses of scenery from Last of the Mohicans, but with no time for photos, headed on down towards our rendezvous point. More and more people started to appear on the path coming towards us - elderly people, young couples with dogs - waiting in sheltered alcoves for our heavy trudging group to pass. When travellers coming the other way were wearing pristine white trainers we knew we weren’t far from the end, and every corner that we turned I expected to be the last. My legs were beginning to tremble with faintness, and I was concerned for my balance. Having survived steep inclines and speedy river crossings it would be a shame to just trip over on a pebble five minutes to the end.

But finally, almost numb with fatigue, we reached the kissing gate where we had started, and tumbled happily through.

Outside the Angel pub our packs slid to the ground for the last time amid murmurings of 'Oh thank God' and 'Oh my back.'

'Ok, soon as you're ready, let's head in.' said Matt, pointing to the pub, 'we're late for our reservation.'

People with foresight had a bag of clean pubby clothes ready in their cars, and Danny guarded the doors to his van out of which Becky emerged fresh and beautiful to face a pubfull of Welshfolk. I had a bag of clothes somewhere but was happy to just sit on the ground in the car park and disengage my brain for five minutes while people got sartorially sorted.

Soon we were gathered around our huge table of 16 that filled most of the back room of the pub. Pints were gratefully quaffed, massive Sunday roasts were gleefully ordered and people passed cameras round to pore animatedly over pictures.

'Well done guys,' said Matt, looking proudly round at all of us, 'well done.'

I don't remember anything else, as it took all my effort to keep my eyes open long enough to finish my meal, before curling up in Matt's car to sleep all the way home.