

Commune Trip #1: Sandy Lane

Friday evening eventually rolled around and, after loading up the van with duvets, organic beer, cake and several kilograms of lentils and rice, Liv, Tom and I set off for Wales!

As Swansea drew near a tiny white van sped past us: Robbo and Sam! We pulled out and overtook them in turn, waving frantically until they saw us, grinning with excitement. We drove in convoy for the rest of the journey, the somewhat dystopic industry of Swansea giving way to the sandy heath of the Gower, full, at this time of year, of yellow gorse and wildflowers in abundance.

Our cottage for the weekend sat in the midst of Sandy Lane: a *plotlands* community that had sprung up from early 20th century holiday chalets, one of several such communities in the Gower Peninsula. The cottage itself was an amazing, timber-framed construction, built over 2 years by our host, Dave, using almost entirely salvaged materials.



The 'Magical Cosy TreeTops Getaway' cottage. Photo from [AirBnb](#).

The cottage was framed with salvaged timber and built on the foundations of an existing building. The interior, which was beautifully organic and used curved wood to frame the fireplace and form the mezzanines, skipped glass for the windows and reclaimed tiling surrounding the woodburner. Dave showed us some fascinating photographs of the construction process; one such photo showed him using the flywheel of an old truck to power his makeshift sawmill!

One particularly interesting takeaway was the choice to angle the gable on the kitchen roof to the Equinox: during the summer months the window would be entirely shaded, cooling the interior,

whilst the angle of the sun during the winter months would allow sunlight to flood into the kitchen and warm the house. Talking to Dave about his construction was the first of numerous inspiring and highly motivating conversation to be had over the weekend; his passion and interest in the build (as well as in our own project) was contagious.

The first evening was spent drinking beer and catching up. As Tom collected Gaby from the train station we began cooking a dal for dinner and, just as Max, Peter and Jamie arrived, we sat down to eat together in the living room. Music, conversation, games of bananagrams and slices of Liv's filthy cake kept us occupied for the rest of the night.

I woke in the morning aware of a deep silence, punctuated only by rich, plentiful birdsong. I lay and savoured these first moments, mulling over the conversation of the previous evening and deeply happy to be beginning our adventure.

We spent the morning playing on the beach: running up and down the dunes, climbing the cliffs and holding a very alternative beach sportsday. The Three Cliffs beach is truly beautiful and, once again, I felt that we'd stumbled upon a very special part of the world.

"When you're following your personal adventure, the universe conspires to help you achieve it."
— The Alchemist, Paulo Coelho

Heading home for a late lunch, sand filling our socks and coating our hair, I chatted happily with Gaby about our vision for an ideal climate: there was the ever-present Goldilocks conundrum ('not too hot, not too cold') but with a concern for sunshine and the ability to grow food. As beautiful and lush as Wales may be, I don't want to be kept inside by the weather (sodden feet, year-round, is not appealing) - yet a landscape with too little water holds many concerns of its own.

Pete, having arrived mid-afternoon, exhausted after an all-night gig, joined us as we ate together on the terrace. Lauren arrived a few hours afterwards, once we'd finished our lunch.

The crew, now complete, made the short drive to the nearby village of Murton, aiming for a local community called Holtsfield. The community, which came recommended by our host, was similar in nature to Sandy Lane but altogether less developed and, to use Dave's words, 'spoilt'.

We wandered around a little aimlessly at first, unable to find the houses. After talking a while with a lady on a magnificent white horse (Sam commented, "it looked as if it was of a different time"), a resident of the community walked past with his horse and dog in tow. I was a little saddened by his initial suspicion of our group - he asked about our purpose and looked thoroughly unconvinced - yet we followed him down the track into Holtsfield.

Shortly after arriving, as we stood around, taking in the settlement and talking amongst ourselves, Alistair, a local resident, walked past and begun to talk. Al seemed to warm to us immediately and proceeded to spend the next hour or two showing us around the site, describing its history and asking about our own plans and interests.

Holtsfield is set on a beautiful, wooded site, carpeted with endless drifts of wild garlic (Liv walked along nibbling the white flowers all afternoon!). Al showed us around the vegetable garden and the roundhouses, one in a clearing and one tucked into the woodland. We were also shown the

remains of an ancient chapel, a single wall of which remained standing, alongside a tranquil spring that we drank from.

We were then pointed in the direction of the beach, another short stroll through some exquisite British woodland, where we sat and glowed with anticipation and excitement, talking in small groups as we soaked up the scenery.

On our way back to our vehicles we found a stack of books left by our impromptu guide. We sat and flicked through them with interest, each nursing titles such as 'Permaculture in a Nutshell' and 'The Transition Timeline'. Al reappeared and, as we spoke to him once more and thanked him for taking the time to talk to us, he surprised us further with his generosity by adding that we could take the books away with us: 'there's no use them sitting gathering dust in my house', he said, 'if you ever come back this way bring them with you'. He was one of the friendliest and most genuinely heartwarming people I have spoken to and I believe it was an inspiration to all of us that, adopting a communal lifestyle as he had, and as we were aiming towards, could lead to such a happy, friendly and seemingly-fulfilled existence. It was also very striking to realise that, in taking such an open approach to our presence and gifting us with his time and attention, he has inspired us enormously - given that outreach and education is such a shared motivation within the group, I feel that this is a valuable lesson to takeaway.

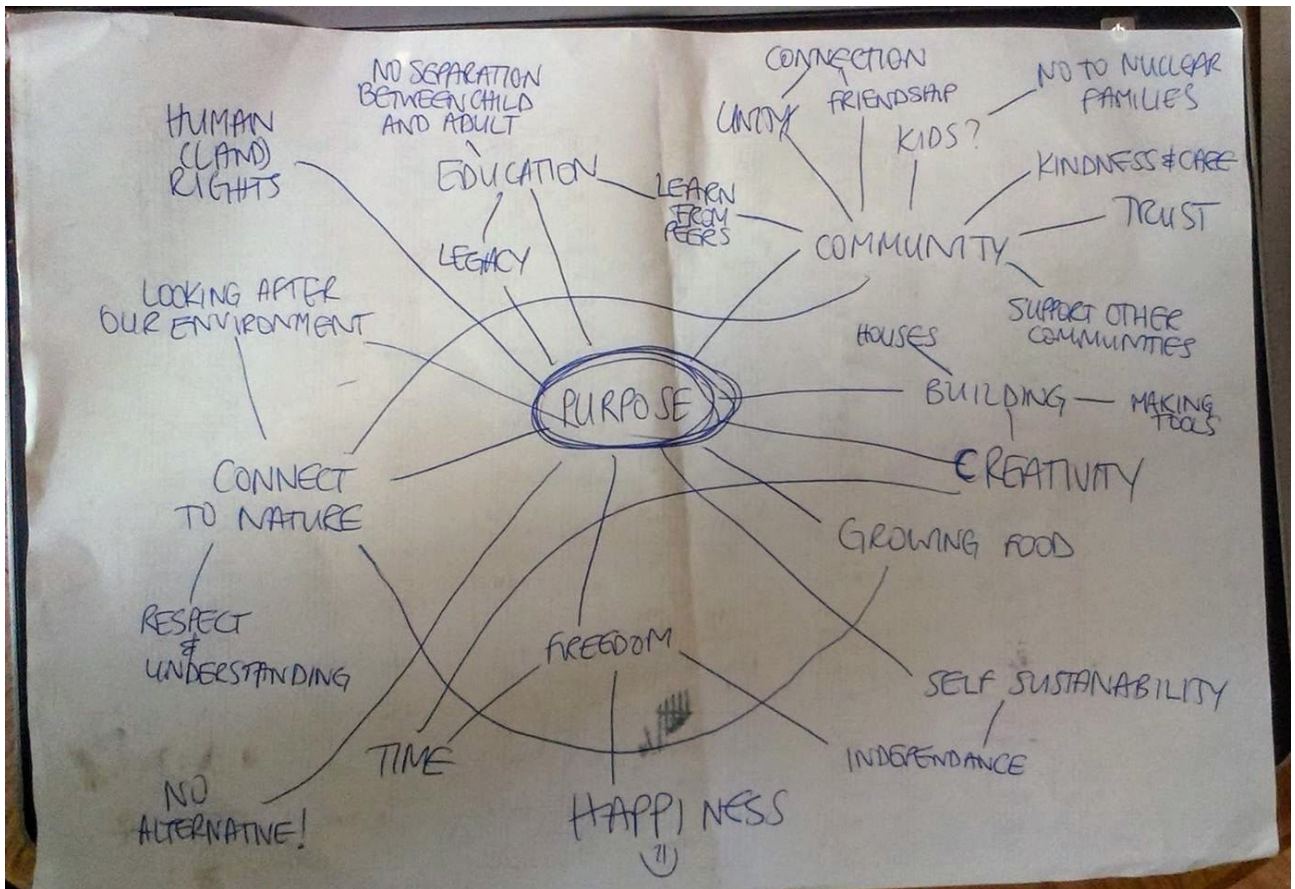
That evening, vibrating with optimism for the future, we built a fire at the top of the garden and sat down to eat, drink, and begin to talk formerly about our project. We broached such topics as location, ideologies, finances, climate change and integration with the local community. Eventually, as the conversation bubbled ever-more vigorously, I asked that we respect one-another's opinions by allowing each person to speak uninterrupted (as I know that myself, and, presumably, several other quieter members of the group may find it difficult to speak over the others).

Tom then proposed that we each take a turn to express our motivations for joining the project, as the conversation had naturally taken a turn in this direction. Two quick questions followed: who should begin and which direction should we follow (to, which, Peter noted with a wry smile: "Which way does a spliff get passed?"). These decisions made, we moved into two discussions for the rest of the evening:

- Once around the circle talking about our motivation for joining the project.
- Once around the circle talking about our timescale and projected financial contribution.

As we all spoke it became apparent that, whilst our individual motivations varied somewhat, particularly in the order of their importance, there was a surprisingly unified vision of our future. We collectively placed importance on developing a connection with the land, our shelter and food; eliminating the notion of a nuclear family; living a more sustainable lifestyle; cultivating personal freedom and educating and motivating others to follow our lead.

The second discussion was focussed on our projected timescales, the question of "when will you be ready to begin?", and what we would likely be able to contribute financially to the purchase of land and resources. The answers to these questions ranged from 9 months to 5 years, and £3,000 to £9,000.



The notes taken from our first, 'purpose' circle discussion.

Light conversation flowed for the remainder of the evening, although many of us went to bed shortly after (the outdoors and seaside frolicking lends an amazing and pleasant sense of weariness to the body!). I slept extremely well and deeply, immersed in happy dreams about life to come.

We woke on the final morning, once more bathed in birdsong, to breakfast and chat in the sunshine. Sam played kitchen hero and, assisted by many willing *sou chefs*, poached a brood of perfect eggs for us to tuck into. Dave appeared once more and we talked for a while about his plans for the future as he showed us his photographs - he wants to move to Kenya to purchase a valley in the mountains and start an ecovillage.

The final day was spent ambling across the clifftops, admiring the views and enjoying the conversation. The weather was a blessing and made for a wonderful experience. Our destination was Hareslade, another chalet community, but time constraints forced us to turn back before we arrived - we looped back across the fields, picking edible wildflowers for a salad as we did so.

After a final lunch on the terrace and a quick clean, we packed and said our goodbyes. It was a beautiful and serendipitous weekend in every way and, I hope, one of many more to come.

A final point of note was our resolve to absorb the transportation, food and drink costs as a group: it is simply not fair that those of us able to hitch a lift should pay less for the experience than those bound to a train. By equalising the associated costs we are also minimising and barrier to entry, a notion that I believe to be of extreme importance.