



Huts and well-being: growing with huts

After years of promoting effective therapeutic environments for young people around the world, David Dean has come home to The Lazy Duck.

Fifteen-year-old Sasha appeared at my dacha door with little Kyril in tow. “David: We come fix your stove”. They were inside before I knew it, raking out the ash and laying new dried kindlers. I hardly needed this service, though I had yet to unpack. This was their time-worn way of saying hello to me on my annual visit to their children’s village. You may know that the Russian stove, quite a small box firing a chimney, is a work of art with its honeycomb internal structure. This ‘storage heater’ allows warmth, lasting from tea time to well past dawn, to be trapped by a top damper set in the intricately laid brickwork. I have in my possession a cherished early 20th century Russian ‘master manual’ for such a chimney. This particular master had kept his design very much to himself, rather as did my mother-in-law with the recipe for her special ginger cake.

Clockwise from left: The young are the future; Learn from such as these; Reverse the old timers. Overleaf: Heading home in Russia; Simplicity.

While I lived solo in my tiny dacha, Sasha and Kyril, like the rest of this innovative community, lived with their professionally supported foster parents in their own home, a larger dacha built mostly by the men and boys and with stunning carved wood decoration, some of it strikingly painted by a visiting volunteer from Lake Baikal in Siberia. We all met regularly for some communal meals and for work. For some of the time we could choose, if we wished, to being just on our own or with our small family group. Here, in this unique environment and with ordinary yet special people to guide them, distressed children grow [1]. I should explain that in Russia the term ‘dacha’ can refer both to the humble wooden hut such as I was living in, as well as to a ‘New Russian’ splurge of ostentatious, oversized and bad taste architecture so favoured by those would-be oligarchs with money to burn.

Working thirteen-hour days in this exciting place, Kitez, home and progressive, alternative school rolled into one, was made all the more happy for me by my feeling of well-being every time I retreated inside the small space with its substantial golden ochre, horizontally-laid logs, each one nestling into the other with a layer of jute bedding. I experienced a euphoric wave of coming home. Under low-wattage lighting, my bed doubled as corner seating for when adult workers came to talk with me. My kitchen work surface, shower, sink, and loo were all in perilous proximity to each other in a small offshoot lean-to. I was provided with one large working table and, eventually after seven years’ service, a reasonable armchair. Above my head was a whole upper storey with layers and layers of yet more heat-conserving deep jute insulation.

In winter, just inside the only door, my very Russian peasant snow

boots, made totally of felt, dried off and warmed rapidly ready for the next exit into the heavily sub zero temperatures. On summer visits, I was met with a whole new world of herbs, roses, and the busy chatter of young scholars helping with the cows, new wood building and more. Two kilometres away though, through the forest and over a sea of sticky mud which somehow produces a crop, the neighbouring settlement's five remaining ancient wooden houses shelter similarly ancient souls. They, after a lifetime of servitude to the land, pick their painful way home from the well, the outside toilet, and sometimes from a neighbour, to stare again at their brick built stove's fire box. Outside, hens parade loyally until dusk. Doubtless there has been joy and rustic merriment here, but not for a long time.

Hutting in Scotland

It seems a mite presumptuous to offer to this Journal's audience the rationale for the Scottish hutting movement. The argument was won years ago. As has been explained by architect Gail Fraser (née Halvorsen), in her most excellent article, *Hutting in Scotland* [2], we in Scotland may well be set for a revival in hutting and, as Gail says, there is much we can be encouraged by in Scandinavia and elsewhere. Were this to happen there would need to be a considerable lifestyle shift; chicken or egg? The current small scattering of lone huts across the UK, and the gathering settlements of huts in Scotland, hardly represent the potential there most certainly is for a revival of the culture which existed between the two world wars.

In those times, a few enterprising Scots, living in meagre post-war conditions, took themselves out of their urban struggle to connect with

hills, woods, and water, by living in small shelters. One commentator quoted her grandparents as saying that their time spent living in a hut was "the result of being poor". In making my presentation to the 'Why do Huts make People Happy?' event at Abriachan in August 2015, I drew on my own Norwegian, Russian, Romanian and Thai/Burmese experiences to make this very point. Let's be in no doubt. If we look globally, there is much poverty and deprivation being experienced by those living in huts. So too, of course, in urban settings but, as my own farm worker great grandparents would attest, the notion of idyllic rural living goes only so far for some folk.

Current moves in Scotland to relax planning conditions for the building of huts for more joyous recreational living, offering increased well-being together with the proliferation of both inspirational literature and outdoor activity provision for those looking to identify that elemental part of themselves, is encouraging. There is also a growing conviction that land, our land, is best not viewed simply as a large-scale investment made by the well-off, often the exceedingly well-off, but should be regarded more a citizen's birthright in which we may have a legitimately-held stake of usage at least; ownership, perhaps. I am persuaded too that in the 'landowner/land-user' relationship, the notion of responsible stewardship has to be reciprocal. Owners of urban woodland and amenity areas surrounding villages could do well to heed Scandinavian legislative requirements of responsible, visible, planned management. Users might then be encouraged to act in support.

Part-time elemental living

In each hutting setting I have lived in, I am always thankful for the location

in which I have found myself. No matter which country, almost always have I been caught unaware and unprepared for the magnificent appropriateness of where I am and how inspiring and rejuvenating part-time elemental living is and, with a struggle, attainable. And latterly, my family's home has, in forty years, grown organically from being a rather wretched cottage constructed of timber and chicken wire covered with a cement harl, set in a half acre of rough land with an almost-blocked burn struggling to reach the River Spey, to something of a haven for toe dipping paying guests often looking for they know not quite what. They do though so often find 'it' here, looking from the trees to the hills with a duck or two floating in between and the experience lights them up truly. Some internalise and express themselves in words or less. Some want to 'take a hut away', others to sit down more deeply and have us help them look at the possibilities for themselves as aspiring hut builders and/or owners. I suspect that in this holistic, simple environment, they reconnect and they too grow.

On elemental hut living, Rhiannon Batten of *The Guardian* describes *The Woodman's Hut* as "a soulful space" [3]. But let's allow a guest have the last word:

"Wow! What an amazing stay. Having been to the hostel before we knew we were in for a treat at The Woodman's Hut. Total tranquillity and all the best things in life: fire, stars, birds, deer, outdoor shower, views to die for, more wildlife and cosy times slowing down and enjoying unplugging from busy lives." Ray & Mo, Fife

lazyduck.co.uk

References

1. en.kitez.org
2. halvorsen-architects.co.uk/hutting-in-scotland
3. tinyurl.com/gn7zbdd

David Dean runs The Lazy Duck, near Nethy Bridge, with his wife Valery. The six-acre site contains a tiny eight-bed hostel, three semi-off grid huts, and a four-pitch camping site.

