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**AFTER** what seems like an age of furiously rubbing sticks together, I finally see a plume of smoke forming — and I'm euphoric.

Forget baking banana bread and home-schooling. Of all the things I've done lately, making fire is undoubtedly my proudest moment.

Next I'll learn how to cobble together a wooden shelter, fire an arrow and cook on an open fire, all courtesy of The Bushcraft & Wild Cooking experience at Finnebrogue Woods in Co Down. The course, led by a Bear Grylls-esque woodsman called Rob Hill, ticks a lot of boxes for our current needs: it's outdoor, can be done with social distancing and supports a local business.

With staycations looking set to be a feature of how we holiday for the foreseeable future, lots of us are keen to learn more about our forests, foraging, camping, identifying native species and basic survival skills. Before we set off into 200 acres of privately-owned wood just outside Downpatrick, I'm keen to establish Rob's survival credentials. "If you dropped you, Bear Grylls and Ray Mears in the middle of nowhere, who would last longest?" I ask him. "Well, probably Ray because he has a bit more covering," replies Rob.

Based on these requirements, I feel my training in lockdown (eating all the biscuits) stands me in good stead for the day ahead.

"We'd all survive longest if we work together as a team," adds Rob, wisely. I soon deduce he's being coy about how hardcore he actually is. It transpires that he has been all over the world with the Royal Navy and has lived off-grid in the jungles of Central America. He's also led expeditions in the Himalayas and Antarctica and laughs when I ask if he's watched Levison Wood's shows, describing the explorer's efforts as "just walking for quite a long time".

We arrive at the camp, all of which has been hand-constructed by Rob out of wood, canvas and recycled materials (including a surprisingly comfy seat made out of an old wheelbarrow). Far away from the public trails, it feels like the wild to me.

I'm here for the day class, but it is possible to camp overnight, although glamping it is not. This is very much a back-to-basics experience and the first task of the day is starting that all-important fire.

Rob makes it look easy and effortlessly creates a friction fire in a matter of minutes, essentially just by rubbing sticks together.

Inspired by the knowledge that lunch is going to be Finnebrogue-reared Dexter beef burgers and sausages cooked on whatever fire I start, I get to work trying to do the same.

It's tough. A small plume of smoke emerges, but then I lose momentum and it vanishes. Deciding that friction fire is perhaps not for me, I move on to flint — with greater success.

I learn to strike stones to create sparks, which I then wrap in kindling and blow on to make the flame grow. Alas, a sudden gust of wind ensures all my efforts are for nothing.

It's frustrating, but the process forces you to slow down and focus. We're used to the pace of life being frantic, but it's different in the woods.

Rob is patient, encouraging and, most importantly, lets me cook my burger on his fire. He's an expert on pretty much everything around us.

In the past year I've walked more in local forests and parks than ever before. Inspired by my six-year-old's constant questions, I've become



**HIT THE TARGET:** Chrislie takes aim (left) before sending the arrow to the bullseye. Below: Building a shelter with survival expert Rob Hill



more interested in wanting to know the names of trees and the answer to questions such as, "What bird's song is it that sounds like a high-pitched 'seeeee'?"

It's a chaffinch, according to Rob, who knows how to forage for food in any season.

Over juicy burgers dripping with melted cheese (why does everything taste so much better outdoors?), I discover that he was born and raised in Germany's Black Forest but settled in Downpatrick after meeting his fiancée, Louise.

He tells me that a common theme in clients' feedback over the past year has been the psychological benefits of getting back to nature — and I would have to agree.

After only a few hours, I feel more calm, the tension in my neck from sitting at a desk is gone and I haven't looked at my phone at all.

After lunch my mind is squarely focused on hitting a target, either with a bow and arrow or a slingshot, and then it's onto knife skills.

The time passes all too quickly and, before I know it, I'm back in the bustle of the public car park, where the take-out cafe is doing a roaring trade in burgers and frothy coffees. I grab a latte, but I'm still thinking about practising my fire-starter skills.

My day at The Bushcraft & Wild Cooking experience took place just ahead of the latest lockdown imposed at Christmas. The organisers have now reopened, and will conduct all courses in line with health and safety regulation.

Survival skills are a sure-fire way to make anyone's 2021 bright, so long as they can master rubbing the sticks together.

■ Visit [finnebroguewoods.com](http://finnebroguewoods.com) for more details



**SURVIVAL SKILLS:** Rob Hill has led expeditions around the world and can forage for food in all seasons

