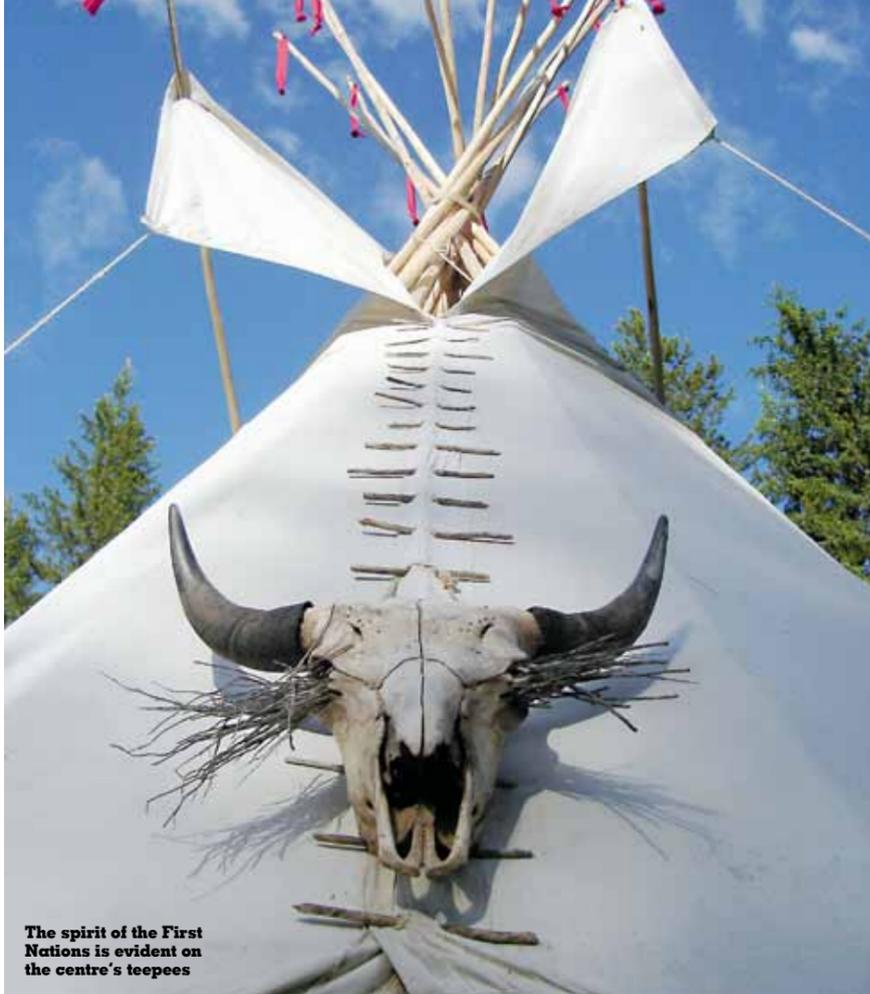




Free spirit Steven East experiences a revelatory rite of passage in the wilds of the Canadian Rockies

A tribe called quest



The spirit of the First Nations is evident on the centre's teepees



A 'Heritage Cabin' in the calm forest



Sequoyah Trueblood



Marilyn decorates the rural cabins



Sharing his wisdom with visitors



Sequoyah's hut is his home as well as his teaching place



The cosy interior of a teepee



Taking a hike in the snow

How do you escape the hustle and bustle of daily life? Have a massage? Visit a retreat? Maybe spend a weekend learning a new esoteric skill? Perhaps you've done all that and you're looking for something different. In which case, how does a week in the Canadian wilderness with a Native American elder grab your attention?

That was the prospect in store for me as I eased my hire car along miles of stony track deep into the forest. Light was fading when I arrived at my destination, the CrossRiver Wilderness Centre, but as I gazed about, I could feel dusty lights in the corners of my mind flickering back to life.

The centre's main lodge looked out over a clearing towards the magnificent Rockies, with eight accommodation cabins nestled in the trees nearby. Other paths wound away into the forest, signposted by rain-bleached coloured prayer ribbons, adding an air of sacred mystery to the place.

I'd driven here from Calgary, four hours away, to attend the 'Elk Runner' weekend. And, no, it didn't involve chasing wild animals round the forest. It was a four-day

introduction to tuning back into the land, based on Native American (or First Nations, as Canadians call them) learnings and traditions.

The first thing that struck me was how highly the couple who run the centre value relationships: between people, between us and the spirit world, and between us and the land. Canadians Rob and Marilyn are two of the kindest and most balanced people I've ever met. Their love, work ethic and respectful nature is ingrained in the very wood of the dwellings they've built and decorated here.

After breakfast on the first day, I found myself drying dishes next to their son, Troy, who runs hiking trips, teaches craft skills and helps out in many of the 'cultural sharing' activities at the centre. You're not expected to muck in like this, but it's a family-run place, and I was soon sharing experiences over a tea towel. I was touched by their grace and generosity, which I felt sure came from living in, and learning from, the land and mixing with people from different backgrounds.

Enter Sequoyah Trueblood, the 69-year-old First Nations elder who lives and teaches here. In the afternoon, he took me through

the forest to the comfortable wooden hut he calls home. There he shared some of the wisdom his people have learned from Mother Nature, and, as I wandered back to my own hut, I smiled as I saw the path through my internal woods beginning to clear.

Sequoyah's father was a Choctaw (a First Nation from Oklahoma in the US), but his mother was a half-German, half-English alcoholic. His German grandmother tried to, in his words, 'beat the

arms,' Troy agreed. 'And there's the grandmother with blow-away hair, and the strict father with never a needle out of place!

'Seriously, Steve, that's kinda how we see Mother Nature here. We're a big family, but we can all get along. It's about sharing, whether culturally, as Sequoyah does with indigenous people from all over the world, or just being here in the mountains, respecting the rights of the bears, cougars and moose to live alongside us.' As he spoke, a hummingbird hovered at one of the feeders he'd put up outside each cabin. 'These guys fly up from Mexico every summer. Can you believe that?' And, yes, I could.

'As we reached a ridge, the sky cleared and the wilderness was revealed in all its pristine beauty'

Indian' out of him, before sending him to one Catholic school after another, where the teachers did the same thing.

He ended up in Vietnam in 1968, but after shooting two North Vietnamese soldiers, he realised, 'I was killing my own brothers – and I didn't know why.' He put down his gun the next day and fought for another three years unarmed. 'A voice would tell me, "Don't worry, Sequoyah, we're

learning from his 'brothers' all over Canada and the US.

After a rest in my hut to digest what Sequoyah had shared with me, I chatted with Troy in the porch of my 'Heritage Cabin' (built in the 1920s by miners for the growing tourist industry) while a hotchpotch of deciduous and evergreen trees bobbed in front of us. 'It's like a family photograph,' I said.

'Yes. There's the stooping uncle and the tubby father with clumsy

needs food. That's what it's all about when you live up here.'

That night, sitting round the communal dinner table laden with wild-caught elk, organic brown rice and salad, Anders and I heard that two other guests were out on a 'vision quest'. When Sequoyah told us what it was, we wanted to do it, so we met the next morning at Sequoyah's hut, where Rob, Troy and his sister, Milaina, had turned up to support us in a ceremony that preceded our endeavour.

We were to spend two nights alone on the mountain with no food or water and just a tarpaulin and sleeping bag to keep us warm. Even though the weather was mild, it seemed a little Ray Mears to me, but Sequoyah explained that a vision quest reconnects you with Mother Nature and the deepest issues in your mind and heart. 'Stuff you may not want to deal with can bubble up again when you spend that much time with yourself,' he said with a knowing smile.

He gave us pieces of coloured cloth to tie prayer ribbons to the trees – for whoever and whatever we wanted. 'Yellow can be for the sun, who gives us energy, and green for Mother Earth – or your own mother.' We shared a pipe of →



Still on the same hike, the weather has changed drastically

PHOTOS: VANCE HANNA AND STEVEN EAST. ADDITIONAL TEXT: HELEN SAUNDERS



Clockwise, from left: the wildlife of the Rockies, including white-eared deer and bears; the purification lodge; Sequoyah gave Steve a bald-eagle feather; the teepee enclosure



accepted they were at peace. I hadn't looked deeply enough into myself to see that my years of grieving had helped me accept their passing, and that I was now ready to focus on my own life without feeling guilty about 'leaving' them.

Before dawn on the last morning, I rolled up my tarpaulin and sat beside the stream watching the light creeping over the clouds, gently singing to myself. I'd discarded my stick by now – I no longer felt threatened by nature and was getting in tune with Sequoyah's thoughts on self-defence: 'When I met a grizzly, I told him, "I love you. Thank you for allowing me on your land, and peace be with you." He just walked away.' I now felt I could say the same. In fact, I had made up a song to sing to him. I'd come a long way in a short time.

Back at the centre, I went with Anders, two other vision questers and some of the family into the pitch-black 'purification lodge', a low tent with red-hot stones in the centre taken from the fire outside. Uninhibited by vision, we shared what we'd learnt, as Sequoyah dropped fresh herbs and water from the nearby stream on to the rocks, bathing us in cleansing steam. Traditional songs were sung, tears were shed and hearts were opened, punctuated by us nipping out to cool down and rinse

peace stuffed with tobacco grown by Sequoyah, while he thanked us for going on the quest and looking inside ourselves to find healing. 'Because when you heal yourself, you heal the world,' he told us. Then we set off into the woods.

Anders wanted a view, so Sequoyah dropped him off in the hills overlooking our valley, but I wanted isolation to help me answer some personal questions, such as how I felt about my parents' deaths from cancer a few years ago. But, as Sequoyah had said earlier on, 'You could stop asking questions and just be silent – you learn more that way.' I was still thinking about that as he left me in a clearing by a mountain stream, so that water was close by if I felt in dire need.

During 40 hours of total isolation and fasting, I learnt a lot: about fear (bears lived here, and I kept a stout stick with me); about frustration (why was I here and what would it achieve?); and about hunger and thirst (although they always passed, to my amazement). And there were revelations. I studied insects and saw how focused they were on gathering food rather than scaring me. I saw the stream flowing, the trees swaying in the breeze, the light changing and the clouds fleeing

past, and felt the air warming and cooling. Nothing was static, except me, although my mind seemed weak and fitful compared to how the ants searched tirelessly for food, the trees held their arms up to the sun and the water in the river simply fell downhill towards the sea. Life could be so simple.

At night, I dreamt of bears and elk passing by my little camp, and even had a sleepy hallucination of Sasquatch, the North American

'For the first time in my life, I began to meditate, and realised I now accepted my parents were at peace'

yeti, running through the trees. Troy had told me fasting does 'interesting things' to your mind. He was right.

For the first time in my life, I began to meditate. Sequoyah had given us a mantra, to be thought in three slow and deep breaths: 'Great thanks – great peace – great love.' At first, every mosquito, splash of water and gust of wind distracted me, but soon I could meditate for a few minutes at a time and forget the bustle of life back in the city.

I also ruminated on my parents' deaths and realised that I finally

the cares from our hearts in the ice-cold stream.

Then it was time to leave, and after warm goodbyes and a scenic drive, I found myself in Calgary's rush hour, with my flight home two hours away. Old stresses began to rise as I hopped between lanes and was beeped at. But then I remembered my mantra and saw Sequoyah's smiling face. I made my flight feeling clear-headed and at peace with myself, just from listening to what's always been there. Simple, really. **SPIRIT&DESTINY**

TRAVELLER'S CHECKS

HALLOWEEN HIGH JINKS

Escape the trick-or-treaters this year with a Pumpkin Carving and Ghost Stories Experience for grown-ups at Littlecote House in Berkshire from 26-30 October. Storytelling will take place with a court jester and pumpkin-carving under the expert eye of the hotel's chef. The hotel has a reputed 20 ghosts, and Henry VIII courted Jane Seymour here, so we're expecting the tales to be tall and colourful. From £317.30 per person for four nights, full-board, plus £20 for the Pumpkin Carving and Ghost Stories Experience. Call 0800-138 2633 or visit www.warmerleisurehotels.co.uk

DESERT STAR

Hoping for an Indian summer? Then treat yourself to a break at the new Mihir Garh (Sun Fortress) boutique hotel in Rajasthan, a stunning building made of wattle, mud and wood in the middle of the desert. Enjoy stargazing, rooftop yoga, or a village safari to meet the Bishnoi people, a nature-worshipping



sect often called the world's first ecologists. From £150 per person per night, full-board, including a village safari and transfers from Jodhpur with TransIndus, excluding flights. Call 020-8566 2729 or visit www.transindus.co.uk

SEX ON THE BEACH

Open-minded lovers can take their relationship to a higher level on a couples-only Tantra-Mantra retreat in Mexico. Hosted by spiritual singer Deva Premal, her partner Miten and tantra expert Rafia Morgan, the retreat runs from 28 November to 5 December at the Maya Tulum Wellness Retreat & Spa, just an hour from Cancun. A combination of singing, chanting and meditation should set you on the path to bedroom bliss. The retreat costs \$950 per person (£575) and full-board accommodation (with vegetarian food) starts at \$1,068 (£647) per person. Flights not included. Visit www.devapremal.com

FACT BOX

- CrossRiver Wilderness Centre runs cultural sharing breaks and adventure holidays with hiking and white-water rafting. Call 001-403 271 3296, visit www.crossriver.ca or email troy@crossriver.ca
- The Elk Runner Nature Weekend can also be booked via Responsible Travel, from £544 per person,

full-board, including all activities, excluding flights. Call 01273-600052 or visit www.responsibletravel.com/canadahiking

- Air Canada flies from London Heathrow to Calgary from £473.50 return, including all taxes. Call 0871-220 1111 or visit www.aircanada.com
- Steven's trip was organised courtesy of Tourism British Columbia. Visit www.britishcolumbia.travel for details.