

Várzea Viva Newsletter

Jan 2011

A happy new year from the Várzea folk!

And apologies to all who subscribed to the Newsletter for having had to wait so many months for this latest one. Well, we are still here, and there will be 2-monthly issues this year, with pieces on a wide variety of subjects – we hope you find some of them interesting.

The autumn was a very busy time (you don't say!), also a time of changes, with a fair bit of contemplation, re-orientation, and discussions regarding our way forward for the coming year – more on this later.

In October we became again a 3-family community, being joined by another young family, already good friends, Paul, Sylvia and 1-year old David. With Paul being German and Sylvia Portuguese, it gives an excellent bridge across the unseen barriers that often keep the national cultures apart. The balance here feels right now, and we all share the enthusiasm and common vision of our project. It has been just a year since we made the good and positive decision to open the Varzea as a place for courses and workshops on Permaculture-related topics, which was the cue for an exciting and creative year. We are still on the steep part of a learning curve which will continue for many years to come.

Permaculture-thinking has increasingly been underpinning our activities and projects involving growing, building, and harnessing the many uses of the sun.

But aside from this continuing part of the project, Culture and Music has been happening at the Varzea!

Since having been honoured by some astonishing djembe playing at our African Weekend last September, with Gambian master-drummers Bucarr N'dow and Jazz Camera, we have been holding regular African drumming and film nights, on the first Saturday of each month.



Brendan here, professional drummer and inspirational constructor, is still expanding the amazing creation of our outside gathering area, complete with fire, seating and roof is nearly completed. With this fine venue, we look forward to these monthly events establishing themselves as lively and multicultural happenings over the coming year.

We now also have a Varzea Band! - who did their first gig at Aljezur's "Fiera de Natal" before Christmas, with djembes and African dance, which went down really well – we look forward to many more performances in 2011, with an expanding repertoire.

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So what is our common vision here at the Varzea? I talked in a previous newsletter about "evolution at the Varzea", and indeed the Vision is constantly evolving: this year 2011 will see a definite change in outlook, with a bigger emphasis on locally based activity and co-operation.

We shall continue hosting courses and workshops, with 2 full PDC's, in March and September, but with fewer workshops, and these delivered by experienced and knowledgeable teachers.

Our regular weekend course, run every two months, is entitled "Creating a Sustainable Smallholding". It's aim is to demonstrate that the ability to make one's land, small or large, productive, beautiful and harmonious with nature, is open to all - and is neither dauntingly complicated nor does it involve "becoming a farmer". As usual there will be a fun, sociable and relaxed gathering in the evening. Details of the course content can be found on the website.

Setting up a weekly open-market for our own produce, products and crafts, as well as those of neighbours who wish to participate, will be a main focus for the year to come, starting in the spring, combining this with music, film and pizza nights.

We also aim to build on our involvement with local schools, after an excellent week in September hosting the Aljezur International School, teaching Permaculture (and some African Dance!) to 12 – 17 year-olds. Act locally, as Permaculture urges us, and it feels right as well as making good sense.

It is fair to say that we are more and more feeling like a true family community here at the Varzea, one in which the different families have their own independent lives and space while sharing the common cause, with mutual respect and communication when necessary. We don't operate from any credo other than simple common sense and respect for nature and her ways.

Finally – as our outlook has been evolving, we have been becoming increasingly uncomfortable with our title "icanfeedmyself", mainly because it is exclusively English, and it doesn't convey broadly enough what we are about: a place of creativity in many different aspects.

Chris Lewis

So: our website address is now www.varzeavivapermaculture.com, for our company name, Varzea Viva.

Just a thought

If music were compared to a forest, African music would be an immense, ancient tree with a huge, sprawling root system. It would be strong, life giving and have sent out new trees in the forest all around. It's no coincidence that the word "roots" and "Africa" are so often found together. In the same way that all people have a deep connection to nature (whether they realize it or not), all sorts of people from all walks of life respond to the timelines simplistic, profound deep soul qualities of the tribal drums which originate in nature's sound.

When taking part in the dances of Africa, be they harvest, wedding, coming-of-age, war dances or the meaning of the mores, in order to feel the dance quality you imagine roots growing down into the earth – this helps you to feel the "earthy" quality of the dance and also to propel you into the air for the high energy mores. If the spirited rhythms don't get you there then your "roots" will!

Since ancient times, music, song and dance have played a vital role in bringing people/communities together and things are no different at the Varzea. West African rhythms, particularly have been hitting the valley with even more regularly over the past couple of months. Gaynor made her third comeback from maternity leave and taught the lovely children of Aljezur International School "Ku-Ku" a traditional, high energy harvest dance, accompanied by Brendan and some of the kids drumming.



Our weekly Varzea jamming session took on a more focused vibe as we performed our first gig together at Aljezur Feira da Natal – nothing like a public performance to get you serious and working hard at your Art!

We all had a lot of fun and are really looking forward to the 8th January, our next African night for more tribal beats and rootsy dancing wo-heh!!

And if the African Diaspora does it for you then keep your eye on us. We're all raring to get even more Arts projects on the go this year.





Natural Birth – a Transcendent Experience?

Silvia Rosa.

In modern society the classic view of a woman giving birth is that of a process controlled by professionals. There is a broad common sense that a labouring woman is a woman in need of help.

Thankfully, a new movement is emerging, considering concepts of natural birth, ecstatic (or orgasmic) birth and the sacredness of childbirth. Does this sound like a myth? The fact is that today, more documentaries, articles and books are referring to this idea.

Until recently, many facts about childbirth have been ignored, for the reason that the physiological process of birth has been disturbed for thousands of years. This interference has passed from generation to generation by beliefs and rituals, until the present day, where programmed caesareans are highly efficient, safe and sadly numerous.

Under such a cultural weight the real basic needs of labouring women are almost never met, and not understood.

Science is now in a position to explain what these needs are and why they should be met. It is interesting to realize that women who haven't been influenced by what they need or been taught, tend to act spontaneously in order to meet these certain needs, which are really quite simple – a labouring woman needs an environment in which she feels safe and protected, without feeling observed. Silence and low lights are also imperative.

When these needs are met, women give birth literally by themselves with no complications and the most amazing fact is that they describe the experience as ecstatic, orgasmic and nirvana like!

The natural process is easy to be disturbed and in order to maintain it, a physiological situation has to be reached – the complete absence of stimulation of the neocortex (the part of the brain responsible for intellect and language). When this is successful, women can then make an inner journey to their primitive brain and enjoy the animal within, moving to an out of space and time experience.

Language, light, feeling observed, the threat of danger and/or any sort of stress, stimulate the neocortex, disrupting the meditative journey to the primitive brain, decreasing the release of the love hormones. These are a group of hormones responsible for the birth process as well as for orgasms and lactation. When disrupted, the mother is prone to have more difficulties in bonding with her new-born and have more complications. Also lactation tends to last less time, interrupting this precious interaction.

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In such a situation, we have a baby being deprived of an ecstatic, full of love birth...all humanity loses.

Connections between personality patterns, especially relating social behaviour, and the way one was born have been made and are powerful.

It is time we ask ourselves "Where is mankind going without love?"

It is time for each and every one of us to reclaim our right to the nature gift for the birth of a child.

Silvia Rosa.

For detailed information and research -

www.primalhealth.com

www.michelodent.com

www.wombecology.com

www.doula.org.uk

www.paramanadoula.com



Educational Visits to Várzea da Gonçalves

From spring this year, we are offering visits for accompanied parties of schoolchildren who will be welcome to attend for anything from half a day to longer residential periods.

Focusing on Ecological practices, Permaculture ethics and Sustainable Living, and with a strong emphasis on experiential learning, we offer a range of activities and experiences, including -

Organic Gardening - planting/harvesting/tending fruit and vegetables in our Permaculture-influenced gardens.

Adobe Building - sourcing materials, making bricks, laying them and sculpting,

Exploring the Natural World – river, hill and meadow walks, during which native and introduced species of plants and wild foods are identified.

Art and Craft – sculptures and structures created from natural materials.

African Drumming and Dance – a cultural experience, workshops are available from professional teachers in traditional African dance and djembe drumming.

Baking –make, bake and eat bread, cakes or pizzas using our outdoor traditional stone-built, wood-fired oven.



There are a variety of spaces here in which to gather –

The Indian tipi, beneath the sprawling fig tree, and our renowned bread oven area.

There is also a large building available, with kitchen, bathroom and dormitory.

It is important to us that each visitor is fulfilled and inspired by their time here.

Our curriculum also includes-



Permaculture ethics and principles – discussing the theories and their application

Permaculture Gardening – soil composition and conditioning, organic gardening techniques, composting, wormeries,

Witnessing a Grey water Treatment system in operation,

Designing a smallholding – planning the infrastructure, organising the land to promote a comfortable, efficient and productive system. Drawing skills tuition is also available.

Fun quiz at the end of the period.

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With ecological awareness developing and being included in some curricula, it is important that children actually experience the principles of sustainable living in operation. Spending time on an organic small-holding, living with nature, provides endless opportunities to broaden their horizons.

Such was the experience for the students of the International School of Aljezur, who spent an enjoyable five days here in September.

The 26 students, aged between 10 and 17 years, arrived daily and followed our syllabus alongside core subjects delivered by their regular teachers. The students benefited from the diversity of the lessons we delivered, enjoyed the different teaching spaces for the theoretical sessions and participated in a wide range of games and activities. In the quiz at the end of the week, they demonstrated a great deal of new information had been learnt and that it had been fun learning!

Kris Lewis



Anna, a student on our last Permaculture Design Course, shared her fab "Moosewood" Cookery book with us. We tried the mushroom bisque recipe below which was considered by all to be delicious. I followed the recipe to the letter the first time round but have adapted it in lots of ways since, always using, what I feel are the keys to its success.

The late addition of the garlic and thyme and even later addition of sherry/red wine and soy/tamari.

Mushroom Bisque.

2 Medium Potatoes – Chopped small
1½ cups water
1½ Tbs. butter
2Cups chopped Onion
1 sml. Stalk celery
1-2 lbs. mushrooms
1-2 Cloves Garlic
Fresh Thyme
3 Tbs. dry Sherry/Red Wine
2Tsp. Soy Sauce/Tamari
Black Pepper
1 cup Milk
Optional: Crutons



- 1) Simmer potatoes until tender
- 2) Meanwhile, melt butter in deep pan. Add onion and celery and sauté over medium heat for 5 mins. Stir in mushrooms and salt, cover and cook for 10 mins, stirring occasionally.
- 3) Add garlic and thyme and cook 1½ mins. Remove from heat and stir in sherry. Soy sauce and pepper.
- 4) Purée potatoes in their water and mushrooms in their liquid. Then combine, add milk. Heat gently. Adjust seasonings to taste. Serve hot.

One of my favourite cookbooks of 2010 was Nigel Slaters TENDER: Volume 1 A cook and his vegetable patch. It's laid out by each vegetable listing gardening tips and recipes as you read. It's an excellent book especially if you have a glut and need inspiration. Nigel really understands flavours so I thought I'd pass on some of his seasoning ideas for:

Spinach – Nutmeg, orange, lemon, cream, eggs, anchovies, bacon, parmesan, pinenuts, mushrooms, garlic, yoghurt

Cabbage – Cream, juniper, caraway, ginger,

Pumpkin – Citrus, bacon, tomatoes, cheese (parmesan, mozzarella and pecorino), ginger, rosemary and sweet spices.

Hope you find one or two inspirations in there for your winter suppers.

Gaynor Stanley