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JACOB PETERSEN | HERALD/REVIEW

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Vincent Pinto, owner of Ravens-Way Wild Journeys, keeps a freshly created fire alive at Raven's Nest in Patagonia recently. Pinto used the hand-drill technique and old bird nests as a tinder bundle. (Beatrice Richardson • Herald/Review)

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PATAGONIA — When it came to making fire in the wild, sweat was my biggest obstacle toward success.

Whether it was the sweat equity required to obtain the tools needed to begin the process, or the sweat from my body pouring down onto tools that are supposed to be dry, sweat seemed to be my only companion.



But as flames rose from the bundle of grass and bird nests I had been saving for just that moment, I found a new friend. No longer was I tired, sore or soaked from head to toe with the salty deterrent that had hindered my journey.


“People always say ‘Vince, why don’t you bring a match?’ I say, ‘You go make a match, and I’ll make a fire kit.’ You’re not going to make a match,” said Vincent Pinto, my guide for the week.

But I did make fire.

And with proof that I could create fire, a friend with which I could interact in what might otherwise be a dangerous survival situation, I had also found a confidence in myself only nature could have provided.

However, the natural world provides more than just an opportunity to learn and have fun. Vincent and his wife Claudia Pinto, who own and operate a nature and wilderness adventure company based near Patagonia called Ravens-Way Wild Journeys, revel in nature as a way of life and as personal calling. They highlight that, in addition to enjoying nature and spending time in it, we are also part of it — the bigger whole.

“Nature is not a place, it is the world. Nature is life,” said Vincent.



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Lighting the spark

Arriving at Raven's Nest just a few miles south of Patagonia Lake, my first thoughts were similar to those that many people have when they embark on an extended trip into unknown territory: 'Did I bring enough supplies? What will the facilities be like? Am I physically capable of doing what will be asked of me? Will I be able to put work out of my mind long enough to enjoy myself?'

But just as I saw Vincent and Claudia walk up to greet me

in the driveway, I gazed upon a butterfly crossing in front of my path. I felt instantly relieved, as if my burdens had been lifted by this near-weightless creature fluttering in the breeze, and I reached out to accept my greetings.

After a brief unloading of perishable items and a chance to ready myself for a hike, I embarked with Vincent on what would become a six-mile nature trek to Sonoita Creek.

"We want people to find that special something, something in nature that provides an inspirational spark. Keeping the fire alive is the key. You want to keep stoking your internal fire with different logs from nature, whatever those logs are for you," Vincent said.

"Here at Ravens-Way, we try to help people find their special spark," he said.

Aware that I was most interested in learning about stone-age living and wilderness survival techniques from correspondence prior to my arrival, Vincent moved quickly to provide the flicker of intrigue I would need to later stoke the embers of a now growing interest in the natural world.

On the way to the creek, we stopped at the top of a ridge leading into the wilderness north of Raven's Nest. Vincent helped me select a few rocks and gave a demonstration on flint knapping, or how to make sharp edges by slamming one rock, the hammer stone, into another rock, the core, at the correct angle.

After making my own cutting tools we came across a Sotol plant and pulled down a dead flower stalk from the previous year. Vincent taught me how to cut the pole without leaving a jagged edge by scoring the plant with the sharp rocks I had just made and then snapping it quickly.

At this point I realized what we were making — a fire-starting kit.

"Fire can do so many different things for you. It's light, cooking, heat, it keeps insects away, you can tan hides with it and use the ashes. I think most importantly though, when you find yourself in a survival situation, it's a companion. You have a friend you can converse with, by say, adding the wood. Fire lives via your interactions with it. When you really think about it, if you don't have fire you are really lacking a key human element," Vincent said.

But through my experience trying to make fire, I learned very quickly that unlike in the movies, making fire involves a lot more than rubbing two sticks together. The simple act of just getting the proper sticks is a time consuming process, and efficient cutting tools are required to adjust them once found.

"If you're out there and need to make a set of tools, like a fire kit, often times you're going to need basic tools to make the tools," Vincent said, adding that flint knapping lies at the core of wilderness and stone-age survival techniques.



As important as working with the right tools can be, however, it is the concept that nature can provide all the tools that are needed to survive that Vincent most inspires within his students.

"You can take it to any level. I'm not about to whip out a 10-inch Aztec obsidian ceremonial blade. I can't do that, but I've always made what I need in the field, and to me that is the bottom line," he said.

Throughout the week I spent at Raven's Nest, I learned how to make many things from the tools nature can provide: Fire, cordage via native plant fibers, mineral paints from colored stones, long-term structures to provide shelter from the elements, and even traps to catch animals for food.

But it was learning about how all of these things are interconnected, and how the idea of depending on nature is something all humans have in common that really began to strike a cord. I felt that, despite learning many things I could use to survive in the wild, it was the idea that I am a part of nature itself that was beginning to envelope my thought process.

I wondered if the conceptual part of this journey would be as fun to experience as the nut-and-bolts aspect of learning how to survive. Would I be able to appreciate things from the inside looking out, as a participant of my surroundings rather than a visitor?



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