



Girl vs. Wild

Do you have what it takes to survive in the wilderness? Our intrepid writer headed into the mountains of Musandam, to take on the Middle East edition of the Bear Grylls Survival Academy and find out...

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

The beads of sweat began to swell on my forehead, and I could feel them about to run down and tickle the side of my neck. They were an unwelcome distraction. My backpack's straps were loose, making it swing precariously back and forth as I cursed loudly.

I was in the midst of trying to pull myself across a rope suspended over Wadi Hilti in Oman, hanging upside down like a squirrel (though in that precise moment, I felt more like a misplaced sloth) as I tried desperately to reach the other side—a move that I later learned was called a Tyrolean traverse. It wasn't

the first time I had been suspended mid-air—my past conquests include one of the world's highest zip lines at Puerto Rico's Toro Verde Park—but it was the first time I'd ever done any sort of rock climbing. Add to that the fact that I'd just run through a wadi (with a fully-loaded backpack on), crawled through several

holes, and abseiled—also for the first time in my life—with several bits of tree branch, a half-melted water bottle and a crusty old abandoned flip-flop stuck into various pockets, and it was quite understandable why I was feeling the strain.

It was my second day of the Bear Grylls Survival Academy, a course designed to put you to the test by throwing you into the wild unknown, along with a crack team of highly trained experts to teach you essential

skills in self-rescue. A concept created by the world's most recognisable face of survival and adventure, the academy launched its first ever Middle East edition of the globally popular courses this February. Each course is designed around its unique terrain, which is why the academy partners with a leading local adventure company to run it—in this region, that's Absolute Adventure, an award-winning adventure tour organiser that



does everything from diving and kayaking to mountain biking and trekking, with outposts set up in the UAE, Oman and beyond. It's the instructors from Absolute Adventure who have worked with the academy to design this particular course—after all, they know the local terrain inside out—and who were, by all accounts, responsible for my tricky predicament.

I had arrived in Dibba the morning before, trying my best to hide a strange combination of trepidation and excitement. After all, I'd seen the videos of Bear Grylls online (a word of warning: If you find a YouTube clip of anything involving Bear Grylls and the skinning or eating of raw animal parts, proceed with caution—or at least don't watch it at lunch time), not to mention watched his sensational show, *Man vs. Wild*. But as someone who has often questioned whether or not I would survive a zombie apocalypse or *The Hunger Games*, I couldn't wait to test myself and see if I really had what it takes to survive. After all, despite knowing I was a tough cookie, being placed in a

situation where all of your home comforts are stripped away shows you what you're *really* made of, right? Getting there was the easy part—a mere two-hour drive from Dubai, I soon found myself at the Adventure Centre, a traditional Omani-style villa just moments from the beach. After a round of introductions, I realised I had way over-packed and hastily stashed my surplus items in the boot of my car—and once my new friends had all arrived (trips typically include about twelve people, plus two or three instructors) it was go-time. We crammed our packs with the provided kit and were off to the wadi.

Day one began with a trek around the area. Our guides—Chris, Dave and Luke—eased us in with tips on how to climb safely, without putting either ourselves or others at risk. By the time we'd clambered up and across several hundred metres—and down again—repeatedly, we were well-versed on how to choose a smarter route. Only pausing for breaks in shaded areas to continue our survival lessons while catching our breath, the

idea, Luke explained, was to teach us the basics during the first day, so that we could put them into practice on day two. Our curriculum for the day was based around the PRWF, or "Please Remember What's First," acronym: Protection, Rescue, Water and Food. By the time we were ready to set up camp for the evening, I had learned how to seek out an appropriate shelter (and when it was ideal to look for one), how to use a knife to either whittle a stick into a tool or create wood shavings that would act as ideal kindling for a fire, how to handle the basics of various first-aid rescue scenarios, how to purify water, how to source drinkable water from your environs, how to tie five different types of knots (and what each type is best used for), and had eaten an unidentified and rather unappetising-looking piece of meat in the name of survival.

By around 5pm, we set out to gather firewood. Chris taught us several different ways to start a fire from scratch, and I was fascinated to discover that anything from steel wool and a battery, to cotton wool, and even a packet of Doritos could come in handy in creating one. While we, sadly, didn't have access to much edible wildlife—alas, capturing and killing a goat wasn't an option lest we risked a hot-blooded dispute with a local villager, many of whom still live in the area—our instructors had brought along some ice-packed fresh fish, which Dave promptly showed us how to gut and cook for dinner. Our group quickly fell into a comfortable rhythm, the

ritual of preparing a meal bringing us closer together despite the fact that at the start of that day, most of us had been strangers. By the time our food had begun to cook, any sense of awkwardness had dissipated, the camaraderie evident.

As our meal bubbled away merrily over the fire, we set off to search for scorpions. Night fell quickly, with the last rays of sunlight clinging tightly to the mountaintops as the shadows settled in, like they were being chased by a sooty beast swelling into valley below. It was pitch-dark by 7pm, and we gathered around the campfire like moths to a flame, mopping our bowls clean with eager fingers before finally relaxing, satiated, after a long yet rewarding day. As we swapped stories around the campfire, it became clear that I wasn't alone in my constant desire to test myself. "It's our natural instinct, to try and survive," said Chris. "Gutting a fish, learning how to cook over a fire—they're basic skills that you can take home with you. I think many people nowadays are losing touch with that sort of thing, and we just want to get back to our roots. Even those who think something like this is out of their depth would discover that anybody can light a fire, or build a shelter—they just need the right tools and instructions." Dave agreed: "It's not just the macho element that appeals—it's the challenge aspect as well. Many people love pitting themselves against something tough, and there's immense satisfaction in knowing that if [the worst] ever did happen,



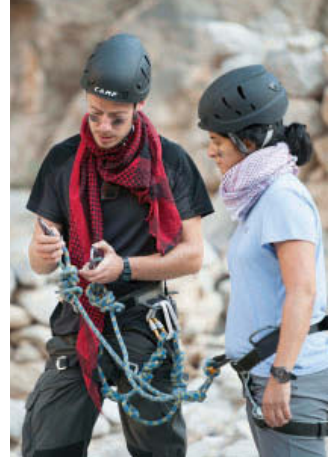
Life and Love

that you might have the skills to survive. It also has a massive impact on people's confidence and self-esteem," he said.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I marvelled at how bright the moon was, bathing the entire valley in a silvery glow. In the crepuscular light, the sky looked almost pink. One by one, my companions began to retreat for some well-earned shut-eye, until there were just three of us left. When I finally headed to my makeshift bed—a sleeping bag spread out atop a patch of ground I'd cleared of rocks and checked rather carefully for scorpions—and wrapped my face in my keffiyeh for an extra layer of protection from any creepy crawlies, I felt a world away from my bustling life in the city. The peace and quiet, punctuated only by the occasional hooting of a pesky owl, was like music to my stressed-out ears and it was just what the doctor ordered.

The next morning I awoke at sunrise, feeling surprisingly fresh despite the fact that I'd shivered my way through the night thanks to a rapid drop in temperature from the harsh heat of the daylight hours. We scrambled to pack up camp, scarfing down a simple yet hearty bowl of oatmeal before spreading the charcoal from our fire across our cheeks, to help keep the sun out of our eyes. From then on out, it was a race back to civilisation—Dave got our hearts pumping with some bootcamp-style drills of push-ups, squats and leg lifts with our loaded backpacks and climbing gear on, before we made our way out of the valley. We'd been asked to keep our eyes open for items we could use in a rescue fire along the way—an entirely different type than the one we'd cooked our dinner on, this one was to burn with opaque smoke to alert the team that would be coming to claim us at the end of the day,

should we complete our mission. Everything from dry and wispy cast-off shrubbery to old bits of plastic, tossed car tyres and the odd discarded flip-flop left over by a wayward villager or hiker was fair game, and I stuffed as many items as I could find into my backpack along the way. The instructors had also left items scattered along our route to see if we'd pick up on what they'd taught us the day before about key tools that could come in handy in a genuine survival situation—embarrassingly, I'd almost entirely missed the length of old rope Dave had coiled by his feet until one of my teammates pointed it out. As we climbed to the top of a large boulder, my heart caught in my throat—Chris was standing at the top holding a series of ropes, and the only way to my destination was by lowering myself down. I'd never tried abseiling before, and there I was about to go in for my first time with a fully-crammed backpack on, that began to feel heavier by the minute. The rock was slippery, but slowly but surely I found my footing and discovered that not only was it a lot easier than what I'd anticipated, this was *fun*. By the time I was about six metres down, my arms began to ache, but the cheering from my companions encouraged me, and before I knew it I was back on the ground and ready to boulder-hop my way to our next challenge: weaselling. This, I knew I could do—being relatively petite and just over five feet tall, I happily tossed off my pack and victoriously climbed through a gap that looked far too small for my head let alone my entire body, only briefly getting stuck thanks to the ropes and gear still wrapped around my hips. Next up was a via ferrata style traverse, a crab-like sideways clamber across some boulders that required me to become really good at hooking and unhooking my carabiners *really* quickly. By the time I'd made my way down to a flat



surface, I was ready to take a quick break, but there was no stopping—it was the moment of truth for our first-aid rescue skills. Chris's walkie talkie crackled with Luke's voice claiming an SOS injury in the ravine, and we raced through the wadi—knocking my knee rather painfully on the way—before pelting down the road to find our desperate victim. Sprawled out with (faux) blood sprayed around him, Luke was laid out on the ground feigning a broken bone. We spread out, each of us taking on a different role—two of us fetching wood for splints, another two pulling out spare t-shirts and jumpers to make a makeshift stretcher using trekking poles, another person giving him some water, another keeping our victim awake and talking, while the others cleaned and bandaged his wound. We gingerly but quickly lifted him onto the stretcher and rushed him over to the roadside, where a theoretical rescue vehicle could have reached him easily.

It was then time for the most challenging test: the Tyrolean traverse. A mild fear of heights had my insides squirming as I heard that we were to cross from one boulder to another, across a distance of about 25 metres, suspended upside down. I knew the longer I waited, the more I'd psych myself out, so I dragged my quivering limbs up the rock and tried not to look at how far down the ground was as Chris talked me into the right way to push myself off and get across. My backpack had started to feel like a mound of lead, and I was mentally kicking myself for not having tightened the





straps. My arms were on fire, as I told myself to just keep putting one hand in front of the other. I knew that looking back and seeing how far I still had to go would crush my remaining resolve, despite a sneaking suspicion I wasn't even halfway yet. "It's the last big hurdle, just suck it up and do it," I told myself, gritting my teeth as I heaved my flailing body over with one final push, regretting those extra slices of pizza I'd had a few days before. At last, a hard surface pushed into my back, and I knew I'd finally made contact with the other boulder as I gratefully swung around and grabbed Dave's outstretched forearm to pull myself up. Feeling a little bit like a human jelly, I grinned with a delirious sense of pride as Luke showed me the simple

traverse to the rock below, where three of my companions had already begun to set up our rescue fire. It was time for business—the end was, quite literally, in sight. I whipped out a flint and steel, and got to work. Unfortunately, we didn't have the luxury of the cotton wool, Vaseline or steel wool and battery that we'd used to start the fire the night before. "The keffiyeh!" someone shouted—it was an inspired idea, and as we put our heads together we realised that using a knife to cut off a corner of the scarf, dousing it in lip balm (I knew I'd taken it for a reason!), and nestling it in the kindling was our best bet. Twenty tries later, our fire was lit, and we tossed our paraphernalia on top. As the thick curls of black, toxic-looking smoke began to

waft out, our sense of triumph was incomparable. I wrapped my keffiyeh around my face to protect my eyes and mouth from stinging and choking as I stoked the flames, as the team finally began to gather. It was time for our rescue, all of our soot and grime-covered faces grinning from ear to ear.

On the drive back, I was surprised to realise I wasn't ready to head home just yet. The course had been a brilliant taster of what it was like to test my ability to survive, and while I was looking forward to a hot shower and a change of clothes (not to mention desperately eager to brush my teeth), I was happier than I'd been in weeks. A trying couple of months had seen me arrive in Dibba feeling like a stressed-out shell of a person, doubting my inner and physical strength, and here I was just 24 hours later feeling not only like I'd been gone for weeks, but also with a renewed affirmation of the fact that I was made of tougher stuff than I'd ever realised. I couldn't wait to come back and see how much further I could go. Oh, and if that zombie apocalypse ever hits? Come and find me, because I'm your girl. ■

The Bear Grylls Survival Academy starts from \$551 per person for an adult course, and \$678 per one adult and one child for a family course, from October through April in Dibba, Oman. To learn more or to book a spot, visit BearGryllsSurvivalAcademy.com

Kit List

Brought along or wore myself:

- A lightweight, long-sleeved, UV-protective wicking trekking shirt
- Light but tough trekking trousers
- A sports bra
- Clean underwear!
- Sunglasses
- Clean socks
- Sturdy all-terrain shoes
- A warm fleece/jumper
- Spare contact lenses
- Hand sanitiser
- Lip balm
- High factor sun cream

Provided by the Bear Grylls Survival Academy:

- A 30 litre rucksack
- A head torch
- A sleeping bag
- A mess kit containing a small plastic bowl with a lid, one Ziploc bag containing one serving of oats, and a spoon
- A keffiyeh
- A Gerber Bear Grylls Series survival knife
- A 3-litre CamelBak hydration pack filled with clean drinking water

Survival School 101

Here are the top 10 tips we learned—and always remember, PRWF!

1. Cotton wool, Vaseline and a flint and steel can be some of the handiest tools you have, to start a fire or purify water.
2. A knife is more than just a weapon: Use it to make a tool, as a stake or hammer, or to build shelter and start a fire.
3. When purifying water, patience pays: Some of the best methods might take a little while longer. But when you're truly desperate, any water is better than no water! Bear Grylls hasn't just drunk his own urine for fun, you know.
4. Don't throw away your trash hastily—you never know what could come in handy later.
5. When rock climbing, don't forget to look up: A permanent foot gaze is more common and risky than most of us realise.
6. When scoping out terrain, get as high as possible for a good view.
7. Stuck for food? Watch out for what the wildlife around you is doing—if they're not eating or drinking it, it could be because it's poisonous.
8. Always try and keep a rope on you—like a knife, it has countless uses, from acting as a pulley, a tourniquet or a climbing tool, to helping to trap food and build shelter.
9. Don't be silly just for the sake of trying to be a hero or wanting to act macho—if you can find an easier way to survive, take it. There's no point in making things harder when that energy could be saved or better used elsewhere.
10. Keep your spirits up—a sense of humour can be a survival tool in itself when you're on the brink of losing your will (or your mind). After all, any survival challenge is, in large part, also mental.