

From The Sunday Times

January 13, 2008

It's all tribal and strife in paradise

In 2006 we revealed a plan to set up an eco-community in Fiji run by an online tribe. So has it worked?

Vanessa Jolly

Ben Keene was sitting at his laptop at home in Devon when he received an e-mail from a friend, Mark Bowness. It read: "A tribe is wanted."

The challenge was this: to establish an eco-community on a South Sea island that would be created and controlled over the internet. Within weeks they had launched Tribewanted.com, calling for 5,000 people to join an online tribe that would establish a real-life democracy on Vorovoro, a palm-fringed, coconut-groved idyll 25 minutes by boat from Fiji's main island.

For a membership fee of between £120 and £360 potential tribe members could buy the right to live on Vorovoro for a few weeks each year and help build a village. All the decisions – from whom to elect as monthly chief to whether to build a treehouse – would be organised and voted for online by the rest of the "tribe".

"The internet is the most powerful way to connect like-minded people," says Keene, 28. "We're tapping into the trend for social networks that allows decisions to be made collectively by people all over the world." In fact they had tapped into every man's dream of living in paradise. When The Sunday Times first publicised Tribewanted in April 2006, the response was immediate.

"We were on Good Morning America; there were film crews in my back garden," Keene recalls. "I was invited on BBC Radio 2 and I got a call from a guy who had pulled off the motorway just to say, 'I don't want to miss my chance to be part of this'."

The tribe quickly amassed 700 members from 35 countries, so Keene headed out to Vorovoro.

"I was thinking, business is easy." But as he was about to discover, creating utopia would be anything but.

With just four days to go till the first 15 members arrived, there was no sanitation, no facilities, no power; just 200 acres of undergrowth set in crystal water.

No work could start until he presented a whale's tooth to the landowner in return for timber. Two days, and sleepless nights, later he found one at a market. He admits that by then he was feeling "physically sick" with anxiety. "When you create a business on an island," he says, "there is a capitalist framework that you have to use and then you've got these ancient traditions and ideals of community living and there are moments when the jigsaw pieces don't quite fit."

Since then he has had to contend with a bushfire, a military coup, a number of cyclones and the threat of bankruptcy.

Tribewanted has turned out to be an ambitious mixture of online networking – the trend popularised by sites such as Face-book and MySpace – and socially responsible adventure travel, or "volun-tourism". But in some ways it was a natural progression for Keene, a politics graduate who had worked for a gap-year project company on programmes in places from Tim-buktu to Kenya.

Its members are predominantly from the US and Britain and aged between 18 and 35, but they have had a 60-year-

old yoga teacher and a Hawaiian spearfishing instructor on the island. Some people come for escapism; others are fascinated by the idea of building paradise. Will, 19, a student from Worces-tershire, is under no illusions: "I'm escaping from responsibility." For John, 57, an engineer from west London, it's about the "cultural exchange".

Stuart "Kimbo" Kimberly, 26, an office worker from Leaming-ton Spa, had never travelled outside Europe. "Perhaps I was too judgmental before, but meeting these people from different cultures has changed my outlook and possibly the way my life is going."

The island has been leased for three years from the chief of the neighbouring island, Mali. Chief Tui Mali welcomes all visitors to Vorovoro with a traditional kava ceremony – a coconut cup full of a mildly narcotic greyish liquid – as a gesture of friendship.

But the island has never attracted as many tribe members as Keene hoped – even as the first composting toilets were built and trees felled, Tribewanted was in crisis.

An American blog, The Jem Report, posted a message claiming that Bowness, 27, was a "text-book conman". He had dreamt up internet start-ups before that had not worked. Although everything was legitimate, there was a feeding frenzy on the web, with the two entrepreneurs accused of trying to work a scam.

"It should have been painfully obvious that we're not," Keene says. "I'd put my face in national papers on both sides of the Atlantic. Who's going to run away from that?" But the subscriptions stopped.

The initial funds had been used to lease the island for £49,000 and set up the website. They urgently needed 10,000 gallons of drinking water as well as power and facilities. They were hoping for 100 people on the island each week; they were averaging 20.

To keep the project afloat, Keene borrowed money from family and friends and took out a bank loan of £30,000. Bowness, unable to raise private funds, bowed out.

"Mark couldn't invest so I would have taken all the financial risk and yet he would have retained ownership. It's one of the horrible things about running a business, especially for a project like this which is all about community ideals. There are a lot of important values in it and you're suddenly placed in a situation where you feel like a bastard. We worked it out, but it was a hard time." If anything, the travails of the digital tribe go only to show the importance of human networks. The project is wholly dependent on cooperation with the local Fijians – Varita, the head cook, Tevita, a horticulturalist, and Ulai, the chief's nephew.

"Everyone is paid," Keene says. "We spend an average of \$22,000 Fijian dollars [£7,000] a month in the local economy. We hire boats from the local villages instead of buying our own to create income; we've employed more than 150 people."

Together the two tribes – Fijian and internet – have built a 50ft Fijian longhouse, staff quarters, an open dorm, family huts, two bucket showers that run into a reed bed so the water is recycled and used on the garden, water tanks, a treehouse and even a tiny football pitch.

The next task is to make the island sustainable. They have a partnership with Ecotricity, which has provided wind turbines. "We were so excited that we could plug in our phones and power up our laptops, and the Fijians said, 'Don't you want to put up some lights?' " Keene says. Most of the food is grown or reared on the island and they have started to create biogas.

They now have a sustainabil-ity manager, Duncan – who proposed to his girlfriend Julia on Vorovoro on Christmas Day with, of course, a whale's tooth. There have been four other engagements, all couples who met through Tribewanted.

Despite the catalogue of disasters – after the bloodless coup in December 2006 the Foreign Office advised against travel to Fiji – it is the introduction of jobs and alcohol that has been hardest to manage.

"Kava is important but apart from that [the Malians] are a conservative Christian community, and although people

might come here and want a beer around the campfire we have to be really careful,” Keene says.

There was a serious conflict of authority when two Fijian boys stole beer from the group. Keene wanted to fire them “but I was told that was wrong as the chief Tui Mali will use his power. I may not have chiefly power but I felt I had the right to sack someone I employ”.

All of this has been chronicled for a documentary, Paradise or Bust (January 21, 9pm, BBC2). In March the project will be halfway through – after the lease is up, Vorovoro and its village will revert to the Fijians. There are still only 1,343 members. “At some point I will need financial security,” Keene says. “I’ve risked everything. But I’m doing the most exciting job.”

It remains to be seen whether his social experiment will pay off, but the signs are good. From the lookout point on Vorovoro, Ulai sums it up: “I never thought that one day I would sit here on a computer and talk to the world about this island. The last time I sat here I was collecting wood with my grandfather. Who knows what will happen in 10 years’ time?”

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times. Search [globrix.com](#) to buy or rent UK property.

© Copyright 2008 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

