



A virtual paradise

Was is ever going to work - forming a 21st-century 'tribe' online with odd trips to a Pacific island?
Decca Aitkenhead investigates

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What is this thing draped over my neck? As I brush it off in the dark, still half asleep, it feels moist and long, like a raw jumbo sausage. But that can't be right; I'm in bed. And here's another one, beside me on the sheet. Fumbling for my torch, wide awake suddenly, I sit up and scan a dim glow over the mattress. Now I see what they are. Fat, black, six-inch giant slugs.

But that's not what woke me up. It was a scuffling noise, so what can that have been? Something is scratching at the edge of my mattress on the floor. It's too dark to make out anything, but as the sun slowly rises, in the shadows of dawn a silhouette appears at my feet. Oh God. It isn't really, is it? But yes, it is. A big, furry, determined rat.

I'd quite like to get up now, I think. What I really want is a wash. But that means getting in the sea. And the sea snakes, I've been warned, are so poisonous that if one bites you, you'll be dead within six minutes. The spiders are apparently harmless, though - which is a relief, because in the toilet last night, reaching for loo roll in the dark, I closed my fingers over one only very slightly smaller than my hand.

I lie still, watching the rat, and work out how many more nights of this I've got to get through. It isn't how I'd pictured a Fijian island paradise. Who'd have thought 24 hours in economy class to get here would turn out to be the most comfortable bit of the trip?

Two years ago, a pair of young British internet entrepreneurs decided to start their own 21st-century tribe. They would lease a tropical island, and set up a website called Tribewanted.com. Anyone could pay to join their tribe, and membership bought the right to visit the island for up to three weeks. On the website, the tribe would exchange ideas about how their island should be run. On the island, members would live as a sustainable eco-community, and learn the traditions of the indigenous people. Each month, a new chief would be elected to oversee the project, but all major decisions about life on the island would be reached collectively by online vote.

Ben Keene and Mark James belonged to the generation raised on Lonely Planet, MySpace, and an approximation of democracy fashioned in the Big Brother house. They didn't know much about ancient tribal culture, but they knew a lot about online social networking, and the internet community's paradoxical desires for both technological isolation and primitive human contact. Having found an island in Fiji - three untamed miles of jungle and sand called Vorovoro - and signed a three-year lease, in the spring of 2006 they issued their global invitation: "A Tribe Is Wanted."

Seldom can a single internet idea have generated more instant media excitement - or more references to Alex Garland's *The Beach*. All over the world, people heard about Tribewanted and began signing up. Keene and a small team set up camp on Vorovoro, and that autumn the first tribe members - that is, non-Fijians - stepped

ashore to embark upon what one newspaper called a "unique social experiment" that "could revolutionise tourism".

The experiment is approaching its halfway point now. They have built a village in the traditional Fijian style - a grand bure, or thatched barn, surrounded by smaller bures - with a rainwater-gathering system, kitchen shelter and compost toilets. Solar panels and a wind turbine provide enough power to light the kitchen and charge small batteries, and vegetable gardens, pigs and chickens provide some of their food.

With a BBC documentary series, *Paradise Or Bust*, about its first year beginning this month, and a book by Keene, Vorovoro is a much-documented little island. And yet, when I visited last month, the story of the idea and the reality on the island began to look like two quite different things.

The first thing that strikes you when you land on Vorovoro is how uniformly young everybody is. There are seven tribe members here when I arrive, five of them in their late teens and early 20s from England, Ireland and France, and backpacking around the world. Only two, both of them 31, have travelled just to Vorovoro - Eliza, a quietly self-possessed Chinese American professional here from LA for a two-week break, and Chris, a loud, wisecracking Canadian electrician who was island chief in September and has come back for Christmas and New Year.

Keene, 27, gives himself the full on-island title of Chief Bengazi, but generally goes by Ben. He is now in sole charge of Tribewanted, after James withdrew when some of his earlier schemes were attacked online. Relaxed and smiley, you wouldn't immediately guess Keene was the boss - but there is more than a touch of the young Richard Branson in the slightly studied beach bum look, and the lines he occasionally comes out with such as: "There's basically two challenges here, people and money. And that's what it comes down to in life."

The tribe's chief for December is Alice - or "Chief Alisi" - a Scottish graduate in her mid-20s reaching the end of a gap year. On her profile on the Tribewanted website, under "Books I Love" Alice has written, "All of them", and under Dislikes, "Negativity". Among the six permanent members of staff who complete our group, positivity is clearly quite a theme. Typical online entries include, in the section headed About Me: "I'm living the dream." Before long I'm tempted to hack into some profiles and insert the words "It's All" before About Me. Five of the six staff are British, in their early to mid-20s, taking time out from careers in marketing, banking, computing or pharmacy to work on the island for between four and 12 months.

Before the palangi - white people - arrived, Vorovoro's only inhabitants were the family of a neighbouring island's tribal chief, Tui Mali, from whom Vorovoro has been leased. The family's two houses have now been joined by a scattering of huts housing the dozen or so Fijians who have come to work for Tribewanted. The women cook while the men help the palangi build, fish and learn the complex rituals of tribal culture.

But the first big surprise is that there doesn't seem much actual work to do. The days start with a 7am bell, summoning everyone to breakfast where hangovers and insect bites are compared. Near the dining area is a blackboard on which Chief Alisi chalks her suggested activities for the day. These tend to be pretty undemanding - "collect firewood", say, or "grate coconuts" - and are largely ignored. The staff assure me this is only because it's Christmas time. "If members just want to lie in a hammock and read all day, well, that's cool..." Chief Alisi says, not sounding as though she entirely means it. And, in fact, most of us do spend the days playing chess, reading books or lazing about.

However, every time we hear the beat of the village's ceremonial drum, we must stop what we're doing, put on a sulu (sarong), cover our shoulders and assemble for another kava ceremony. Kava is the indigenous intoxicant, a root of relatively mild narcotic effect but immense symbolic significance, and every noteworthy event, or visit from Tui Mali, is honoured with the elaborate ritual of a kava ceremony. The roots are pounded into dust, then diluted with water in a large wooden bowl, around which the men sit crosslegged and the women with both legs tucked to one side, soles facing away from the chief, who sits at the head of the bowl. If

you rearrange your legs before one of the wing men guarding the bowl gives an instruction that sounds like "Dondo", granting permission to stretch, you will get a nasty look from the Tribewanted staff. Accidentally walk behind the chief, and you're really in disgrace.

The hypnotic majesty of the ritual is impressive - as is the seriousness of everyone's commitment to protocol. But, secretly, I find the tension of trying not to get it wrong a bit of a strain - on a busy day there can be three, four, even five kava ceremonies, and they can last for literally hours. Is everybody really enjoying themselves as much as they seem to be? Some of them definitely are - but dissent in the tribe doesn't seem to be encouraged, so it's hard to be sure. I start looking out for any hints of fellow dissidents.

Soon I get a hunch that Eliza isn't wild about the constraints placed on personal hygiene by the sustainability ethos. Jauntily hand-painted signs are dotted everywhere, reproving us to use water sparingly, but Eliza looks freaked out by the greasiness of the dishwater, and keeps volunteering for washing-up duty so she can covertly refresh the bowl. The village has a "shower area", featuring a tap and a bucket, but none of the staff pointed this out when I arrived, and there is a distinct undercurrent of moral eco one-upmanship. "Oh, we take a bath in the sea," they enthuse, when I ask about washing facilities. "It's not at all salty!"

"I've noticed," Eliza mutters darkly, "that the staff go that way when they wash." She nods towards the shower area. "And when they come back they smell so good! You know, I'm looking at their hair and thinking, how did you get it like that? I mean, I recycle at home. I don't use plastic bags. But I want to brush my teeth, you know?" She gazes out to sea.

"This isn't what I expected. It's basically exotic camping. I mean, this place has great vision. But personally, I would make a lot of changes."

When I mention the slugs or rats to staff, though, I get the impression I have failed some unspoken test. The distinction between sustainability and back-to-nature machismo isn't always clear. Nor, more problematically, is the logic of locating a sustainability project on the other side of the world.

Tribewanted's sustainability manager is Duncan, an infectiously passionate mad professor type from Bath. He gives every new arrival a tour of the island's eco components - the compost toilets, the renewable energy, the bio-gas project to convert manure into cooking gas - and it's impossible not to catch his excitement. He's currently building a water maker, a great pile of rocks on which condensation will form at night; the simplicity is ingenious. But to learn how to make a few litres of water, a tribe member from the UK must fly about 10,000 miles.

"Well, er, yeah," Duncan concedes. "There's not a simple explanation for it. I don't... umm, it's something I find really hard to explain, to be honest. It may not necessarily negate those flights, but if every person who leaves here is an ambassador to change others, then that will go a long way. We just have to work really hard to educate people about their impact on the environment." Wouldn't the best way to protect Vorovoro be by not being here at all? "We don't have a pitch perfect answer to this question, because, umm, there isn't one."

Once or twice at meal times, George Monbiot's name comes up. "I mean, does the guy think people are just going to, like, stop flying?!" people laugh. "The planes," someone says, "are going to fly anyway, whether we're on them or not." When I point out that this could be extended to wearing fur coats or looking at child porn - what the hell, it's there anyway - I receive looks that suggest I may not be measuring up in the positivity department.

After a while, being on Vorovoro feels less like a radical experiment and more like an episode of Friends. The banter is attractively quick-witted and relentlessly upbeat, but pretty low-cal and somewhat cliquy. Staff are quick to police newcomers who inadvertently transgress tribal etiquette by, say, sitting incorrectly around the kava bowl, but seem surprisingly unconcerned about respect for community living when it comes to playing

rave music and drinking beer into the early hours. When a mother and her four young children arrive from Australia, the staff are too busy partying to lift a finger to help as she struggles to set up camp beds and mosquito nets in the dark.

"To be honest," observes Cedric, a tribe member, quietly, "this place doesn't seem to be what the website claims it's about at all. I don't have a sense that we're trying to achieve anything right now. It's reminiscent of freshers' week." An urbane Oxford graduate on a gap year from law school in Montreal, Cedric would not have come, he says, had he known what it was really like. "It seems to be more of a 20-year-old place to chill and get drunk for a bit; a funky little backpacker hangout. And, sure, to have a tropical island to yourself is a very cool fantasy, but if you're not drinking beer until late, well, you're not going to feel included."

Eliza doesn't drink, and decides to go home. The family can't sleep because of the partying, and discuss leaving early, too. "This isn't really what I expected at all," worries the mother privately. "Am I just being a bad sport?"

The US reality TV show *Survivor* was filmed on a neighbouring island, and there is much snooty hilarity from Ben about feeble gestures at cross-cultural engagement between contestants and local tribespeople. But I can't help noticing that when we practise the meke, Fiji's traditional dance, the Fijians are laughing and playing volleyball. I wonder if we look to them as Americans might, camped out on the Orkneys learning the highland fling, to local Scots playing pool in the pub. When I offer the analogy to one, Savay, he smiles kindly and nods. "Well, yes. There's one whole village on Mali [a larger neighbouring island] that doesn't like this. They say you can't come in and form a tribe when you are not born with a tribal symbol. When we're born, we're born into a tribe. You are not."

There is nowhere to escape on Vorovoro. On the morning of a ceremonial feast to thank the Fijians for their work throughout the year, a pig is slaughtered, and Eliza runs for the beach, hands over ears to block out the squealing. The staff wrap banana leaves round their arms. Then they black their cheeks with charcoal. Oh dear God no, I think. They're not actually going to put on grass skirts, are they?

What happens next, however, makes me reappraise almost everything I've thought about Tribewanted so far. Everyone sits on the floor of the grand bure. Kava is presented, and in the formal hush the Fijians address the gathering. They speak in Fijian, with such passion and fluency that at first I assume they must be reciting some ceremonial mantra. Then one, and then another, breaks down in tears. Soon half the gathering is weeping, for the Fijians - as someone translates for me - are thanking Tribewanted for the experiences they have shared, and for the love and respect they have embraced.

The authenticity of the bond between the tribes is so affecting, you suddenly see how the staff can feel it places the whole project beyond reproach. "It's a big thing, a new thing," Tui Mali reflects later, "to build a tribe all over the world to come and live together under one roof. Eat from one pot. And we have done it. This is the world the way it should be. How can people live together when they come from everywhere? But they do it. They've got the money, anything in this world they can buy it, but there is something on Vorovoro they can't find anywhere else."

We file out into the sunshine, and Tribewanted perform a meke for the Fijians. The dances are executed with a balance of seriousness and comedy so precisely right, I laugh until I cry. Two young members from rural Wiltshire - sweet-natured and wide-eyed, on their first big foreign adventure - are flailing around to the beat, and the audience screams with delight. When the girls perform their dance, one of the Fijian men wriggles into a dress and joins them on the grass, bringing the house down.

It strikes me that all my irritations with Tribewanted might owe more to panic at finding my autonomy challenged by community life than to flaws in the project. In Fijian tribal culture, there is no concept of privacy; the idea of autonomy is almost meaningless. To belong to the community is as central to their identity as self-

determination is to our own. And the Fijians on Vorovoro appear, it must be said, to be happier than almost any people I have ever encountered. It is a rather confronting thought.

"The western culture and our culture are very, very different," Savay says. "But you don't get anything worthwhile without difficulties. Vorovoro is like two sides of a coin. The heads and the tails are bonded, but they never meet. We are just trying to learn about each other. The reason for doing this is not for you to become a real tribe member. It's for you to come and learn about us, and for us to come deeply into our culture."

Travel, however, teaches us more about where we come from than about anywhere we go. And the biggest lesson of Tribewanted is one that nobody on Vorovoro likes to mention. If the project exposes anything, it is the fallacy of what we like to call the "internet community". Because Tribewanted's on-island community may be robust - but the online community is falling apart.

In the early stages of the project, the forum on the website was busy with members earnestly debating everything from whether women should use a "moon cup" rather than tampons on the island, to how many times a week the boat should run to the mainland. The number of tribe members who now regularly visit Tribewanted.com forum, however, averages a grand total of between 12 and 24. Increasingly, the monthly chief is elected unopposed, if anyone stands at all, and many weeks can pass without a vote on anything.

By Christmas Day, new arrivals have swelled our number on Vorovoro to 15. We celebrate the day by putting on Santa hats, exchanging Secret Santa gifts, singing carols with Tui Mali. There is a feast, several extended kava ceremonies, and everyone goes swimming in the sea. But the conviviality is due to the accelerated intimacy of foreign travel, rather than to any tribal bonds that we've forged online. For while some have travelled halfway round the world to get here, a quick survey reveals that very few have visited the website even once since signing up, let alone ever bothered to vote.

In fact, only one member on Vorovoro matches the concept's original brief - Chris, the Canadian electrician, who could be the poster boy of Tribewanted. Eighteen months ago, Chris was sitting in traffic flicking through radio channels when he heard about Tribewanted. "Awesome!" he thought. Twenty minutes later he was home at his computer signing up, and since then has spent close to C\$10,000 (£5,000) attending tribal social gatherings in the US, Germany, Dublin and the UK, coming to Vorovoro to be chief, and now returning for Christmas.

Chris has been a regular voice on the website, but by now even his enthusiasm is waning. Bitching has been a major problem online, with early members becoming suspicious and withdrawing. "They thought Ben was just in it to make money," Chris marvels indignantly. "I was like, if he makes money, congratufuckinglations." The bigger problem with the website now, I suggest, is that it is crashingly dull. "Well, yeah," he agrees, "it has just got a bit boring, to be honest. You can, say, blog about the lovo [ceremonial feast] we had the other day. But the same 12 people say, 'Oh, that sounds great!' And they're the same 12 people who commented on the last 12 topics. There isn't really much to talk about."

When Ben Keene first met Tui Mali to explain the Tribewanted concept, he claimed: "The internet is a global community of people. The big difference is that with the internet you use a computer to get someone, and here you use a boat." Ben was, he admits, "half expecting the chief and his men to turn around and cry in unison, 'Bollocks!'", and must have been encouraged when they didn't. But I suspect the conceit of equivalence between the communities broke down almost as soon as Tribewanted landed. Once exposed to genuine tribal bonds, the notion of any meaningful connection with strangers via their modems becomes very difficult to sustain.

There is an even bigger flaw in the online side of Tribewanted - again, it's not a problem you hear discussed much on the island - but the fact is, Vorovoro has no internet connection. And the reason why Vorovoro is not

yet online is that nothing like enough members have joined. Tribewanted was pitched as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity limited to just 5,000 members. There was so much initial publicity, Ben expected to sell out within months, even weeks. But a 2006 online report, *Is Tribewanted A Scam?*, sowed enough doubt, and inspired Keene and James to rethink their plan. The military coup that ousted Fiji's government just over a year ago dealt another damaging blow.

So today the membership figure stands at around a disappointing 1,320. The funds required to pay for a satellite connection, and thus realise the original internet concept, have not materialised. To get online, you must take a half-hour boat ride to a cafe on a bigger island. And so, far from being a revolutionary experiment, Tribewanted looks in danger of winding up a modest little eco-anthropological detour on the backpacker trail.

Unless, that is, the upcoming BBC series, *Paradise Or Bust*, generates enough new members and revenue to rescue the original concept. By the end of my stay, I'm pretty convinced that this is what Ben is banking on - and, if so, it would be consistent with the weirdly postmodern evolution of the entire project. Because the media has been so charmed by the notion of an internet tribe, and so willing to believe in it, it has effectively been reporting something that doesn't really exist - and, by doing so, just managed to keep the dream alive.

One night Ben and I take a boat to a village on a neighbouring island, to show them an episode from the series that features many of the village's men. We watch it round a kava bowl in the community hall, and afterwards Ben tries hard to elicit a response. "So what did you think? Famous, eh! This hasn't even shown on TV yet. This is a premiere!" The men just carry on drinking their kava. "I don't think these guys really appreciate the magnitude of this," he whispers. "Though maybe," he reminds himself, "that's a good thing." But still he can't resist one last try. "Hey, guys, more than a million people are going to watch this, eh?"

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