



WATTLE I EAT TODAY: Bob Cooper shows *Geelong Advertiser* reporter Jenna Meade safe foods to eat in the bush, including the wattle flower.

Photo: GLENN FERGUSON

Outback, I will survive

I DIDN'T spend my Saturday at a grand final barbecue with a beer in one hand and a sausage in the other watching the Pies humiliate the Saints.

Instead, I packed my backpack and went to a survival camp.

Led by West Australian international survival experts Bob Cooper and Mike House, I spent two days learning about what I should do if I was lost in the wilderness.

Before, I was the kind of girl who would stand back while the guys set up the tent, relax while they built a fire and freak out at the first sight of a snake, even if it was in an enclosure at the zoo.

I'm proud to say I can now light a fire using natural resources from the bush, extract drinking water from a tree and navigate my way through dense bushland - skills that would make any man blush.

But, bragging rights aside, these skills and a new mindset could potentially save my life if I was to find myself in a dire situation.

There was a mix of people from all over Victoria at the course. Among them were two

Jenna MEADE



brothers in their 20s who came down from Melbourne to try something new, a daring girl who liked trying dangerous things who signed up to make sure she had a good backing for her next adventure and a nurse who thought it would be useful on her resume.

Most people think getting stuck in the bush would be all right. They'd use their common sense and the quirky skills they learnt from watching *Man Vs Wild* and get out of there fine.

But many things are not so straight forward.

I didn't know that it would be better to drink cupfuls of water from your sole one-litre bottle in the first 24 hours rather than sip at it for three days; I didn't know which plants could be eaten and which could be used for medicine and I didn't know how to treat a snake bite.

Now I do.

We were like kids at

Christmas when we got hold of our survival kits. Bob and Mike talked us through its contents of 33 invaluable items that would be all we needed if stranded.

The usual tools were there - pocket knife, magnifying glass and alcohol wipes. There was also fishing line, a scalpel and

I admit I never knew how to read a map or use a compass before the weekend.

water purifying tablets.

But the coffee and tea sachets surprised us.

"It takes you to a comfort zone," Bob said.

"The familiarity of the scent makes you think that maybe it's not so bad after all."

Bob's been taking the courses for 22 years and he said everyone gets something out of it.

"It's a win-win-win situation," he said. "I get the satisfaction of watching people learn the skills, people walk away knowing the skills and the environment gets the respect it deserves."

Throughout the course he

backed his tips up with haunting stories that put you right in the middle of another person's survival hell.

He told of a man dying of dehydration just 200m away from a water hole, another who didn't leave a note before wandering off and a woman who took nothing from her car

when she could have made a semi-survival kit from its contents.

Then there were his own experiences.

To qualify as an international survival expert, he has been thrown into situations to test his survival knowledge and ability.

Once he was part of an eight-day camp in the outback, not knowing when it was going to end.

Another time he had to last three days without water in harsh Australian conditions.

Many of his references highlighted the wisdom of Aboriginal ways of life, who he cre-

ated for an array of lasting survival techniques.

"Just because it's an old way doesn't mean it's a bad way," he said.

"People have been using these methods for thousands of years and that's because they work.

"They (Aborigines) also taught us to respect the environment."

One of the first things Bob told us was that fear was stronger than common sense.

"People are scared of snakes and spiders," he said.

"The tangled mess they get themselves in is the emotional side of their brain overriding the rational side.

"You have to remain in control."

Take, for instance, a situation where your car breaks down in the middle of the outback.

Friday's version of myself would have stressed out, blamed the mechanic for not fixing my car properly and probably kicked it in a fit of anger.

Today's version of myself knows to put the car bonnet

up as a sign of distress, take the mirrors with me to create a signal, write a detailed note, leave a map and plan a cleverly thought-out route.

I admit I never knew how to read a map or use a compass before the weekend. Now I can write a map and use the compass to guide me to where I need to go.

A trek through the wilderness on the last day made us familiar with plants that could make tools, those which could kill us if eaten and those which could heal cuts and wounds.

My family and friends got a chuckle out of the thought of me in the bush learning how to survive. But I have emerged with more knowledge than all of them combined.

It almost makes me want to get lost with them just so I can teach them a thing or two.

Bob will be running a second wilderness survival course in Anglesea on October 30-31.

Beginners through to seasoned survivalists are welcome at the two-day camp.

To secure a place, or for more information, visit bobcoopersurvival.com.

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