

# TIME AND SPACE RAY MEARS

The bushcraft expert on why his office has no windows, and he'd invite Geronimo to dinner



Mears thinks igloos were a 'genius' invention



He grew up listening to bands such as Blondie

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If someone mentions home, I don't think about my current house or where I grew up. I think about the British countryside. It's the place where I feel most comfortable; the place where I feel like "me". If I've been away on a trip and I'm driving back from the airport, there's a certain view... a long field, with trees on the horizon. That's the moment when I know I'm home.

**Presumably you were an outdoor kid?** Absolutely. And mine was probably the last generation of kids that actually lived their social lives outdoors. I remember the arrival of Space Invaders and seeing some of my friends sitting in front of the TV, lost in the machine. To this day, I cannot see the point of video games. Even with all its faults, I prefer reality.

**What is the draw of the countryside?** I just liked getting away from all the walls and doors. And getting away from people, too. I've always been a bit of loner. I'd take a tarp and few supplies, head into the woods. Even the rain used to make me happy. I'd stick the tarp up and watch the raindrops. My mum still lives in the same house, in Surrey, so I do go back there, but it's not the same. The fields and the woods have gone – it's all new-build estates. Even old garages have been knocked down and turned into houses. There is no space, it's all people.

**Where do you and your wife live now?** There's not much to tell, really. It's in East Sussex. It's just a house. I have got an office there, but I deliberately made sure it has no windows. If I could see outside, I would never get any work done – I'd be constantly distracted by the clouds or the birds in the garden.



“The shape of a building is important. Any time I come across people who live in round houses, they seem far happier than people who live in rectangles

**Ah, the garden. Living off the land. Bet you've got a giant vegetable plot?** Everybody asks me that. I'd love to grow vegetables, but I don't have the time. The one thing we have tried to do is manage the garden for wildlife. Rather than fill it with fancy plants, we just let nature take its course and leave a few rough edges.

**You can make rope from nettles, but can you put up Ikea flatpack shelves?** I can, but I don't like it. Building anything that comes with instructions and all the bits in plastic bags seems rather soulless. I feel like I'm being controlled by Big Brother.

**What are you like in the kitchen?** Pretty good. I like to experiment, but my go-to dishes are probably Mediterranean.

His home is in East Sussex, not far from Ashdown Forest, far left. Seeing the ruins of Oradour-sur-Glane, left, was a moving experience



WARNING FROM HISTORY

Mears (left, in Australia), learnt judo from Kingsley Hopkins, pictured below with his teacher Gunji Koizumi



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**By experiment, do you mean adding ants, woodlice and moth larvae?** Ha ha! If that's what my guests are expecting, I'll be more than happy to oblige.

**Who would you like to see round the dinner table?** Geronimo. Of course, if I've got Geronimo, I'd have to get someone like Custer. Custer has had a bit of a raw deal from history. And Gunji Koizumi, who introduced judo to the UK. I began learning judo with my teacher, Kingsley Hopkins, who studied under Koizumi, and it continues to be a very important part of my life.

**Is there music playing while you're in the house?** I grew up in the 1970s. Look at what we had on offer – everything from Elton John and Led Zeppelin to Blondie and the Jam. Was I a punk? Yes, I suppose I was.

**Could you live anywhere else?** New Zealand. Canada. It'd be a tough call, though, because I do think that what we've got here in Britain is hard to beat. I'm not keen on the politics, but the countryside is the finest in the world.

**What's the most interesting bit of architecture or housebuilding that you've come across on your travels?** The most fascinating thing for me is that way that humans will take whatever materials are available and build a home. That might be a yurt, a log cabin, a mud hut or an igloo. Whoever came up with the igloo is a genius! The way it holds itself together. The shape of a building is also important. Any time I come across people who live in round houses, they seem far happier than people who live in rectangles. When we get architecture right, it improves the world, but when we get it wrong it blights our lives.

**Has a building ever made you cry?** I'd read a lot about Oradour-sur-Glane, the French village that was destroyed by a unit of the Waffen-SS in 1944. But seeing it for the first time was beyond words. We often think of that period in black and white, but what's left of those houses is full of colour. Traces of ordinary lives; a sewing machine or a bed. It is a powerful reminder of what once happened and must never be allowed to happen again.

Interview by Danny Scott

Ray Mears is celebrating the 35th Anniversary of Woodlore, Britain's first school of wilderness bushcraft; raymears.com

