

The Montgomery Sentinel

Travel Tales

Intrepid Vegetarian Survivor: Dani Beau

“Naked and Afraid” Female Contestant Beats the Odds in the Wilds of Colombia

by

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Dani Beau is the famous young vegetarian who appeared recently on two of the wildly popular Naked and Afraid (NAA) Discovery Channel shows, known as the “the Mt. Everest of survival challenges.” She survived 21 and 40 days in the Colombian wilderness while only eating local plants she found herself, while provided with no clothes, food or water, and hardly any gear. Today we will learn about her, the reality of TV “reality shows,” her skills, and how we, too, can learn to survive if we are out there, naked and afraid.

Lew Toulmin of The Montgomery Sentinel (LT/MS): Tell me about your background.

Dani Beau (DB): I was born in Philadelphia, grew up in south New Jersey, and began working in wilderness emergency medicine and search and rescue after graduating high school. I earned a BA in management from Wilmington University in Delaware. I am 26 years old.

LT/MS: What is your full name?

DB: Danielle Beauchemin, but I also go by “Dani Beau.”



Vegetarian Dani Beau drying nuts, a major food source, on the TV show Naked and Afraid

(photo credit: Nicole Gormley)

LT/MS: How did you get interested in wilderness experiences?

DB: My parents took us on unusual vacations, doing backpacking, hunting and camping in the wilds. So I got to love it early on.

LT/MS: When did you decide to be a vegetarian?

DB: I was only four when I started questioning my parents about hunting, trapping, and eating animals. I remember asking them at home about chicken nuggets and where they came from. I thought of animals as my friends and was a stubborn kid, so I quickly became the only vegetarian in my family. I would still eat animal products that did not hurt the animal, such as milk and yogurt. After completing the Naked and Afraid 21 and 40 day challenges on a 100 percent vegan diet – no animal products were available -- my body and mind felt incredible, and that motivated me to cut out all animal products entirely. So now I am a pure vegan. And I try to avoid all processed foods. I feel better now as a vegan, both physically and mentally, with more energy, than even when I was a vegetarian.

LT/MS: Were you ever in the Girl Scouts?



Dani and Xena, her Greater Swiss Mountain search and rescue dog
(credit: Ashley Guest/Break the Glass Photography)

DB: Yes, I was a Girl Scout. But I wanted to be a Boy Scout! I was jealous. They went on the cool campouts, while we sold cookies and visited nursing homes.

LT/MS: Tell me about your interest in search and rescue (SAR).

DB: I was always fascinated by disasters on the news, and how people would help the victims. So I started volunteering in SAR, and I specialize in wilderness medicine.

LT/MS: Tell me about your dog.

DB: Xena is my 85-pound Greater Swiss Mountain Dog, named after the TV warrior princess. She is trained as an air-scent search dog, and loves SAR as much as I do.

LT/MS: What do you do to keep in shape?

DB: Xena and I run every morning. And I rock climb several times a week.

LT/MS: How did you first get in contact with Naked and Afraid (NAA)?

DB: NAA uses the casting company Metal Flowers to locate contestants, and I was scouted at a wilderness EMT course. I filled out an application but never thought I would be contacted,

since they get lots of applicants, and I was young and not a world traveler. But I did get three phone interviews, a Skype call, a background and medical check, and then was flown to Los Angeles for an on-camera test. I signed a legal non-disclosure and liability agreement as thick as a book. This focused on not revealing what occurred on the show, before the episode aired.

LT/MS: What happened next?

DB: I still didn't think I would get on the show, but was surprised to get a call, asking me to fly to Colombia on 10 days' notice, to compete in a 21-day Naked and Afraid segment. Even though there was no prize money, I thought it was a cool, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so I agreed. I was not given any training beyond what I already knew, and I was not told what type of terrain I would be placed in. I tried to research Colombian plants, but quickly learned that Colombia is one of the most bio-diverse countries on Earth, with many different climates. And there is very little information on primitive survival there. So it was impossible to learn much in just a few days.

LT/MS: How else did you prepare?

DB: I cut out all caffeine, processed foods and sugars, so that I wouldn't have any withdrawal symptoms in the wilderness. But I tried to put on some body fat, and focused on my mental attitude. I think all that helped a lot.

LT/MS: What survival gear could you take?

DB: I was given a very limited menu of authorized survival items – no multi-tools, tents, firearms, or other sophisticated gear. I was told to bring four items that I liked to the hotel in Colombia, ranked in priority order. Then the producers chose one of those four that I could bring in. I really wanted to bring a tarp, since I know how to use a tarp for shelter, to boil water (using hot rocks), create a backpack, strip off cordage, and for many other functions. But I was turned down on that, and only allowed a fire-starter—a magnesium rod with striker blades. That was actually my last choice, since I already had good fire-by-friction skills.

LT/MS: How did the actual show get underway?

DB: After leaving the hotel I was blind-folded so that I couldn't see where we were going. As shown in the episode, I really did take off all my clothes, met a total stranger in the middle of the jungle, and tried to survive with him for three weeks. No other gear, food, water or help was provided. No cheating!

LT/MS: What were your impressions of your partner, Charlie Frattini?

DB: I was very anxious to see who he was. The first thing that struck me was his big smile. But then I heard his New York accent and realized he was a 53-year-old macho Marine military man, who wanted to talk about football. So we didn't have a lot in common, and it worried me that he was a "my way or the highway" kind of guy. But we managed to get along and now are the best of friends, and still keep in touch. We

snuggled for warmth on the show, but remained just friends.

LT/MS: The show seemed to show a lot of conflict between you two. How real is this "reality show"?

DB: NAA is a "docu-drama" and they focus on dramatic conflict, not on documenting bushcraft skills. The producers do not order you to do anything -- they film what actually happens. But in editing the hundreds of hours of film into a one hour show, they do focus on any arguments and leave out a lot of items.

LT/MS: What was left out in your show?

DB: Charlie and I actually got along very well most of the time, but this was not featured. He was shown as being really starved when I found a frog and reluctantly gave it to him to kill and eat. But in fact he had managed to catch lizards, grubs, termites, snails and fish, and was fed well enough that he had declined to kill an armadillo that he caught. We boiled seawater and got salt. To pass the dark hours after 5 pm, we made baskets, bowls, tic-tac-toe and checkers sets -- none of that was shown. At one point Charlie started getting nightmares, and once he got up but was sort of sleep-walking and he actually tried to kill me in my sleep, with his kukri machete. But I brought him out of his trance and he was OK. After that we buried his kukri each night!

LT/MS: I am amazed that was not shown! What was the toughest part of the 21 day show?

DB: The extraction was much tougher than the jungle survival. Our extraction lasted two days, and involved building a bamboo raft, floating downstream, then swimming through big breakers and waves half a mile to a rescue boat. We almost didn't make it, and could easily have drowned.

LT/MS: Did you stick to your vegetarian principles for all 21 days in the jungle?



Charlie and Dani
(credit: Shannon O'Rourke)

DB: Yes, I was able to gather plants similar to potatoes, and found mangos, cactus, fruits, heart-of-palm, and river cabbage. I never ate any food that had a face!

LT/MS: How much weight did you lose?

DB: I lost 14 of my normal 120 pounds in 21 days. I eventually gained it back, and had no ill effects.

LT/MS: How did you get involved in the Naked and Afraid 40-day survival marathon, called NAA-XL?

DB: The producers wanted to only use "fan favorites" from Season 1 of the 21 day NAA. Since my 21 day episode had not aired yet, I was not supposed to be cast until NAA XL season 2 (which they are filming now). I was called when one person dropped out, and ended up going with 11 cast members who already knew each other, and no one knew anything about me. So I returned to Colombia with 14 days' notice, with the goal of surviving 40 days in the wild.



Dani spent 40 days on the savannah of NAA-XL in Colombia
(credit: Nicole Gormley)

LT/MS: Did it help you that you had already competed in Colombia?

DB: No. The terrain was very different, more of a savannah and forest than a jungle. For example, we had bamboo on the NAA-21 experience, which was very useful. But there was no bamboo available in the savannah.

LT/MS: What was your biggest challenge on NAA-XL?

DB: Bugs and illness. The day before going into the wild I was interviewed on camera in a location with lots of mosquitos and other bugs. I think I got ill from that, and was very sick with a high fever on days 2 through 6. Later I was bit by no-see-ums, really big mosquitos, and scorpions that would snuggle up to my warmth at night, then sting me! I still have scars.

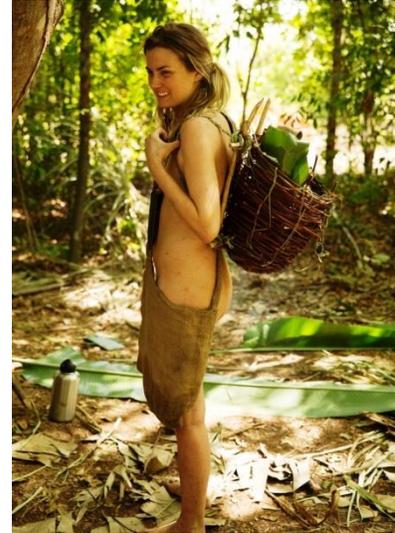
LT/MS: What did you eat?

DB: I was able to stay vegetarian the entire 40 days, and was proud of that. We had about 40 mango trees at our first camp location, so I ate LOTS of mangos and drank lots of mango tea. I never want to see another mango -- ever.

There was also a variety of cashew trees that contained nuts and fruits. And there were ground roots, edible leaves and flowers, Colombian fruits, heart of palm, almonds, cactus, and various wild edibles.

LT/MS: Were there any food problems?

DB: Yes. There were some cashew trees at our first camp location, so I gathered and ate cashew apples. That was easy. But getting the cashew nuts was incredibly difficult. The nuts are encased in a shell filled with sap that is the same as poison ivy sap, so it is very dangerous to process, and can even be fatal. It took me ten days of trying to figure out how to safely extract the nuts, and in the meantime I burned my fingers and skin with the sap. I still have pigment loss. Eventually I was able to harvest and dry the cashews, and they became a staple. I used that in the “dried trail mix” that I created, which I used to eat and as “jungle money” to barter and trade with other contestants after we moved to our final camp. I also found almonds, leafy greens, cactus and the white petals from the “candle of death” plant. That is a plant that has a burnable green bulb the size of a baseball, with edible flowers. Burning the bulb gives heat, light and repels mosquitos. But eat that bulb and you’re dead!



A thin Dani with a backpack she made herself

(credit: Nicole Gormley)

LT/MS: What was your favorite food?

DB: Cactus – very meaty and tasty. I called it my “vegetarian steak.”

LT/MS: Did you lose weight?

DB: Before the show I bulked up to 125 pounds using protein shakes. Then on the show I lost 20 pounds in 40 days, ending at 105. Some of my hair fell out and my period stopped. A couple of months after the challenge was over I suddenly got very weak and ill, but eventually recovered.

LT/MS: Since you lost so much weight, is it realistic that you could survive for say 100 days, or indefinitely?

DB: Yes. At our first location there was enough food to live indefinitely as a vegetarian, especially if I could have moved around a bit and gathered more food. There are some places, though, like Alaska or northern Canada, where being a primitive vegetarian would be difficult or impossible.

LT/MS: Do the producers of NAA ever intervene for safety reasons?

DB: Only if you are about to do something fatal. If you are about to eat something that will make you really sick, but you can survive, they don’t say anything. There is a doctor close by, 24/7.

LT/MS: Does the film crew get in the way?

DB: They do not help us or direct us at all, they just film. But usually there is at least a cameraman, sound man, and producer, and many are urban LA types. So they and their gear are often noisy, and they are close to us most of the day. On NAA-XL there were several film crews and many staff around, so they drove off almost all the land animals who might have been hunted.

LT/MS: As a vegetarian, were you disadvantaged compared to the meat-eaters?

DB: Good question -- I think I had an advantage! The meat-eaters spent a lot of energy trying to find and kill large animals like eels or stingrays. When they were successful – which was rare – they would yell and beat their chests, and eat massive amounts of meat. Then they would lay around for up to four hours, using lots of energy digesting their big meal. And they forgot about plant foods almost entirely. They could have gotten scurvy! By contrast, I tried to work with nature, not against it, by gathering nuts, berries and plants, eating small, regular meals, and quietly trying to have a spiritual experience. That wasn't covered by the TV show, but I think it is important.

LT/MS: How did you find vegetarian food and other resources, in an unfamiliar environment?

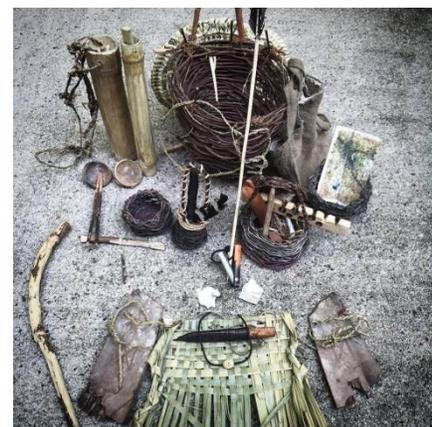
DB: I tracked and trailed my animal friends, not to hunt them, but to learn from them – they are the true local experts. I watched local red squirrels to learn what they used for insulation. I trailed a sly fox, who led me to a local family of agouti, who took me to a new grove of cashew trees and a new water source. This is a technique that can work anywhere.

LT/MS: What a great idea! I have never heard of that one. Were you worried about predators?

DB: No. I respect large animals and leave them alone. I think they will do the same for me. I know animals can be dangerous – one producer on a different NAA episode was bitten by a deadly fer-de-lance snake in his foot, right through the top of his hiking boot. He is still having painful reconstructive surgeries. But I think the most dangerous things in the jungle are usually the insects and the diseases they carry, like malaria and dengue fever.

LT/MS: What survival “products” were you able to make on the shows?

DB: I was the only contestant on NAA-XL to make sandals; I



Dani's NAA creations (clockwise from lower left): throwing stick, tongs, bamboo canteens, baskets, arrow, fireboard, sandals, palm skirt
(credit: Dani Beau)

used the hard upper frond from a black palm tree. Even though I already had a fire-starter, I made fire-boards and drills, to practice making fire by friction. I made cordage, baskets, coconut bowls, hats and clothes from palm fronds, games, tongs, bamboo water carriers, and throwing sticks to bring down fruit. None of this good bushcraft was really featured in the shows.

LT/MS: On many survival shows, meat-eating participants only make one or two traps to catch small animals. Is that sensible?

DB: No, they should set out 30 or more traps and check them every morning. Trapping is very difficult, and the smell of humans can scare off game. Contestants should cover their hands in charcoal to reduce their smell.

LT/MS: Are there set rules about what you cannot hunt?

DB: The different shows are filmed on various private land reserves, and each has its own rules. In some places you cannot hunt or kill certain animals like turtles or howler monkeys. But sometimes the meat-eaters would stretch the rules when off camera. There were no rules for vegetarians, of course.

LT/MS: On NAA XL, Honora Bowen apparently went sort of crazy and threw her own and her friends' survival gear into a river. Was that real?

DB: The TV episode was accurate. But viewers don't understand the stress that we contestants are under. It is often 120 degrees, with 100 percent humidity, and you are dehydrated and starving. I met Honora at the reunion show and she was very sweet. I think she was just out of her element in Colombia.



Dani was one of the only Naked and Afraid contestants to make sandals
(credit: Nicole Gormley)



Dani and her small neck knife
(credit: David E. West)

LT/MS: With all your experience now, if you could choose just one or two survival items to take into the wilderness, what would they be?

DB: First, a tarp. Second, paracord or a fire-starter.

LT/MS: What is the best kind of knife or machete to bring?

DB: I was teased by the other NAA-XL participants because they all brought big machetes, and I only brought a small Norwegian neck knife. [A knife that hangs from a

sheath around the neck. LT/MS] But I think my choice was more practical.

LT/MS: Did your search and rescue (SAR) experience help you?

DB: Definitely. SAR teaches you to constantly look up, down and side to side. I was able to spot tracks, camouflaged lizards, broken twigs, game trails, helpful plants and other things that many contestants missed. On my shows, there weren't any actual SAR events like lost persons, however.

LT/MS: On NAA-XL, you were shown being cruel to contestant Shane, and once you apparently ignored him when he was in pain. Was that the reality?

DB: No. I helped Shane a lot, by giving him food every day, playing checkers with him, and making arrows for him. And I never walked past him when he was in pain. Our agreement with NAA was that they could use any visual or audio clip in any way. So that scene was manipulated.

LT/MS: Did you help other contestants?

DB: Yes, I helped the other survivalists fish and hunt all the time. I helped them make fish traps and spears, set traps, and catch lizards.

LT/MS: Did NAA producers pay for any of your expenses, including post-episode medical expenses?

DB: Contestants are given a small payment to compensate them for not working, and their plane tickets, vaccines and hotel expenses are paid for. I don't know about post-episode medical expenses, since I didn't really have any. Of course there is no prize money.



Dani provides fish to two NAA contestants

(credit: Nicole Gormley)

LT/MS: It seems like there are two schools of thought shown on NAA and other similar shows – people who lay around and do very little, and others who over-work themselves and get heat stroke. Is that accurate?

DB: No. That is a false dichotomy, even though that is what TV often shows. For example, the “six pack” group on NAA-XL was shown as lying around all the time. But in fact they did search for and catch food, make fires, and did work quite a bit. We should work with nature, not against it. There is no need to beat our chests and yell when an animal is caught- that is disrespectful.

LT/MS: What survival and bushcraft schools would you recommend?

DB: I think one of the best is the Tom Brown school in New Jersey. He wrote a number of early, excellent bushcraft books.



Dani making baskets
(credit: Nicole Gormley)

LT/MS: Yes, he was a great tracker. [See www.trackerschool.com. LT/MS] Did you ever look into competing on other survival shows?

DB: Yes, I looked into “Alone.” That show has a \$500,000 prize if you outlast a dozen other contestants. But that was set in northwest Vancouver Island in British Columbia, in the late fall and winter, with virtually no fruits, berries, or edible plants. So it wasn’t practical for me, as a vegetarian who won’t eat meat, fish or shellfish.

LT/MS: Is NAA doing well and expanding?

DB: Yes, the show was nominated for an Emmy and is bringing in international contestants in upcoming seasons.

LT/MS: Would you do another NAA show in the future?

DB: Probably. I enjoy the challenge. I would try to make it another spiritual adventure.

LT/MS: Has NAA led to other opportunities?

DB: Yes, I am talking with a major outdoors group, but can’t give details yet.

LT/MS: What do you want to do in the long term?

DB: I have gotten lots of great feedback from other young women and vegans. I want to keep following my passions and dreams, and spreading good knowledge about healthy ways to live.

LT/MS: I am sure you will succeed.

More information on Dani Beau can be found at www.facebook.com/xDaniBeau/, titled “Cruelty Free and Vegan.” Lew Toulmin is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and the travel/adventure columnist for *The Montgomery Sentinel* of Montgomery County, Maryland.