

Travel Tales

How to Survive a TV Survival Show: Parangs and Tsampa

Part 1

by

Lew Toulmin

So, you've been accepted as a contestant on one of the dozens of current "survival" shows on TV, such as *Alone*, *Naked and Afraid*, or *Men/Women/Wild*, and you're about to be shipped off to some Godforsaken hell-hole to compete. Cool! You want my advice on how to win your big bucks or bragging rights. No problem – with me in your corner, success is guaranteed.

This month and next I will tell you about the gear you need, and in future about what actions to take. Survival items you need include:

A parang. Few Americans have heard of parangs, but all British Special Forces operators have. The Brits discovered parangs in the Malay Emergency and while fighting the Indonesians in Borneo in the 1960s, and have used them ever since. A parang is a very strong, curved machete that is four tools in one: an axe/machete for cutting down trees, saplings or bamboo, a knife for finer, whittling work, a skinner, and (with a squared-off top spine near the handle) a fire-steel for generating sparks off a ferrocerium rod. The curved parang handle allows the tool rotate a bit in your hand as you chop, so the weight of the blade – not your hand or arm – does most of the work.

An adequate "Bidor" parang with a 12 inch blade and a stick, pinned tang can be purchased in any hardware shop in Malaysia for just \$15-25 US dollars, or from www.machetespecialists.com for \$42. Looks primitive, but it works. The two finest parangs in the world are from Sergeant Major Lofty Wiseman of the legendary British SAS (Special Air Service special forces regiment) for \$276 (11 inch blade; www.heinnie.com) or from Ben Orford in England (www.benandloisorford.com) for \$513 (10 inch blade). Mine is the cheaper Condor Village Parang, \$62 from Amazon, which I received as a gift after my authentic Borneo parang was stolen in Portland, Oregon. Don't buy Bear Grylls' parangs -- they are a poor shape and many broke at the handle-blade juncture, and were recalled. Tacky.

TV survival shows such as *Naked and Afraid* (NAA) will allow you to take one or two survival items with you – be sure a parang is one of them. Shows like *Alone* allow you to take ten items. Since a parang is really four items in one, it really helps with your gear planning. You can probably convince the producers that it is the Malay equivalent of an axe -- which it is, and much more.

You may also want to take a small knife along for up-close work, if allowed. Many experts recommend Mora knives from Sweden – try the Mora Bushcraft Black (\$57 on Amazon).

Tsampa. This is the survival and everyday food of Nepali sherpas and Tibetan villagers – even the Dalai Lama loves it! It is usually finely ground barley flour, but it can be made of other grains such as millet, wheat or soybeans. But barley is best, since this is the type of grain that has been feeding humans for 10,000 years, and was the mainstay of Roman gladiators and legionnaires. Barley flour is very rich in protein, so it builds muscle (most gladiators rarely ate meat – too expensive), and yet has plenty of carbs, vitamins and minerals. The famous explorer Peter Fleming lived only on a few bags of barley tsampa while riding on horseback and walking across Tibet and India for seven months in the 1936. His resulting book *News from Tartary* is an ode to the stuff.

Tsampa is incredibly lightweight, such that only a tiny amount will make a small meal. Order it from purple-mountain-tsampa.com: 5 pounds for \$54. You will need to learn the tricky procedure of mixing it with hot tea (preferably “rancid butter tea”) or hot water, so that it forms a doughy but not sticky consistency. It smells and tastes sort of like ground up Sugar Smacks (now Honey Smacks), a kid’s cereal, but has no sugar. You can add fruit, berries, butter, fat or other items to your dough for variety. Some Tibetans eat it straight, as dry flour. But that is for experts, since you can choke on the dust.

The producers of *Alone* will allow you to take five pounds of beans or other similar food as one of your ten allowed items – convince them that tsampa is a reasonable substitute. With five pounds (80 ounces; 2268 grams) of tsampa, you can make 189 small meals of 2 tablespoons (12 grams) each in the wilderness, enough to stave off starvation for 100+ days! The winner of *Alone* in early 2015 only lasted 55 days up at the cold, wet and windy north end of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. So with your tsampa you can last longer than that, and use your parang to source other food locally. Already you’re a winner! Unlike most survival competitors, you may actually gain weight!

Next month we will cover gear for fire-making, shelter construction, and other key survival tasks.

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861 words

Travel Tales

How to Survive a TV Survival Show: Fire, Water and Shelter

Part 2

by

Lew Toulmin

We heard that you will be on one of the dozens of current TV survival shows – congratulations! So we are trying to get you the right gear. This month we will talk about gear for fire-making and shelter. Here is what you need:

Fire-steel. When I was a Cub, King, Boy and Sea Scout in Thailand and the US, I always used matches to make fire. Matches stink. Even though I was allowed three for my Firemanship merit badge, I almost didn't earn it. Matches break, get wet, tear, are flimsy, and only last a few seconds – dump them. A fire-steel (a.k.a. a ferrocerium rod) is much better, since it rains sparks on your tinder. The best cheap fire-steel is the \$8.95 Adventurer Survival Fire Starter from bestglide.com, while the best high end fire-steel is the Lightning Strike Fire Starter on Amazon, for \$67.50.

A hammock. Forget sleeping on the ground in the jungle or wherever you are sent. That's for masochists, like the many contestants on Naked and Afraid or The Island who ended up on their first night with over 200 bites from "no-see-ems" or other bugs. One bite is enough to drive me crazy; I can't imagine functioning properly with 200! No-see-ems carry over 100 diseases, included the dreaded Leishmaniasis, which gives 12 million people world-wide nasty sores and sometimes fatal spleen infections. Nice.

Bring a hammock with a built-in mosquito/bug net. My buddy Robert E. Hyman, a Fellow of The Explorers Club and one of the few explorers to have led and survived numerous expeditions into the notorious Darien jungle of Panama, says that the best jungle hammock is made by Hennessey (hennesseyhammocks.com). Try the Explorer Ultralight Asymmetrical for \$280. At just under three pounds for the hammock and rainfly, you get a no-see-em screen, and don't need a tent.

If those dastardly TV producers won't allow you a hammock, learn how to quickly build a bed at least 3 to 5 feet above the ground, using vines and bamboo or other poles. A study by Israeli scientists found that one meter above the ground, sand fleas were reduced by half, and only about 15% of sand fleas jumped as high as two meters. (Google: "Studies on the flight patterns of foraging sand flies.") So get up as high as you can – natives in South America sometimes build their huts 15 feet in the air! Or move at least 400 feet upwind of the beach or other infested area.

Cover. A waterproof, heat reflective tarp is a good choice. Try the Grabber All Weather Blanket, 12 oz. and 5x7' for \$19 on Amazon. If possible, supplement this with the unique parachute space blanket advocated by Paul Coakley in his YouTube video "Redesigning the Emergency Blanket." He sews numerous pockets in a length of parachute cloth, then fills the pockets with rectangles of space blanket material. But he leaves a margin around the pockets. Thus he gains reflective heat while allowing the device to breathe and not become clammy. By the way, Paul's YouTube channel "junglecrafty," with numerous videos on his trips through the hot, dangerous jungles of Malaysia, is probably the best teaching tool on the planet re jungle survival.

Paracord. This has 1000 uses, and is in every sensible survival kit. Get the military grade 550 paracord, with seven or more interior strands that can be pulled out and used for thread, snares and fishing nets. I recommend the milspec paracord labelled "MIL-C-5040" from bestglide.com; \$9.95 for 100 feet, or get FireCord, which also has burnable jute twine inside. A new type of super paracord may be available soon, with fishing line, copper wire, and jute inside, in addition to nylon threads. If possible, bring some 350 pound test tarred bank line, also, which is less slippery for knot tying: \$8.50 for 117 feet on Amazon.

Container. A great container is a wide mouth 32 oz. stainless steel bottle, and cup and stove set from survivalist Dave Canterbury, \$70 at selfrelianceoutfitters.com. With the bottle alone you can boil water in your campfire. With the set you can cook meals too – try to get your producers to let you count the set as one item. Or go high end with a Toaks 2000 ml (2.1 quart) titanium pot (\$75 on toaksoutdoor.com) and/or a titanium canteen/mess kit (\$153 from heavycoverinc.com).

Magnifying glass. On a clear, sunny day, a six-power magnifying glass (\$8 at selfrelianceoutfitters.com) or even a small plastic Fresnel lens the size of a credit card (\$4 at prosurvivalkit.com) can start tinder smoldering in seconds. Learn how to transfer this tiny fiery coal to a larger tinder bundle, to get your main fire started.

If you have the items above, you will have covered the famous five “Cs” of survival -- Cutting tool, Combustion starter, Container, Cordage and Cover – and you may even be able to Create some Comfort! Cool!

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857 words

Travel Tales

What to Do to Survive and Win a TV Survival Show:

Part 3

by

Lew Toulmin

Last month we discussed what gear you need to survive and win one of the many current, popular TV survival shows, such as Naked and Afraid (NAA), Alone, Ultimate Survival, The Island, Build to Survive, Dual Survival, Man-Woman-Wild, Marooned, Survivorman, Dude: You're Screwed, Out of the Wild, the various Bear Grylls and Ray Mears shows. Don't forget the show with the best title of all: Fat Guys in the Woods! This month and next we will outline what actions to take, in order to win.

Note that all this info on gear and actions might save you from becoming a Zombie's lunch, if you believe in prepping for an impending Zombie Apocalypse or other disaster. Here are actions you need to take, in either event:

Work hard but don't overwork. TV contestants usually follow one of two schools: work themselves to death, or do nothing. Neither makes sense. In hot climes, you need to start work before dawn, when it is cool. Go check your traps and snares. Do some fishing.

After dawn, work on your shelter and other high priority survival "products" roughly in this order: abundant clean water, fire-making and firewood, land and fish traps for food, vegetarian food, cordage, sandals, containers for boiling and cooking, baskets, fire reflector, hand-fan, hat, primitive clothes, mats, cloths, blankets and new tools such as a walking stick/spear, spoon, fork, shovel/digging stick, tongs, punkah fan, atlatl, throwing stick, hunting boomerang, sling, staff sling, etc. Aim to make a new useful "survival product" every day or two. Take a nap during the hottest part of the day.

Then get active again, through late evening. By firelight, do small tasks such as making cordage or weaving baskets, like the millions of women in poor villages all across the developing world. Pace yourself, but don't subscribe to the "lay around dying" school. That's not real survival.

Identify and use your local "master plants." These are plants or trees with thousands of uses. Three wonderful examples spring to mind: bamboo, palm trees, and Western Red Cedar (or their local equivalents). Bamboo is incredibly strong, and can be used for shelters, flooring, roofing, spears, arrows, traps, rafts, containers, shovels, and even pots. Yes, you can fill a bamboo joint with water, stick it right in a fire, and it will survive and boil your water, tea or rice.

Palm trees can supply young coconuts for their water, older ones for their meat and oil, husks for tinder, leaves for hats, clothes and roofing, trunks for building and burning, shells for cups, and guinit (brown mesh fiber) for primitive cloth. Palm guinit was even fashioned into pith helmets by the Philippine Constabulary in World War II. Learn to climb a palm tree, by looping rope around the soles and tops of your two feet, then wedging your feet around the tree, and bouncing up the tree like a kangaroo. (See www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0jLMjggCgk)

If you can make good, pure coconut oil, you can try "oil pulling" – swishing a tablespoon of oil around your mouth once a week for twenty minutes. My colleagues in Vanuatu swear by it. Their teeth are perfect, while mine have paid for my dentist's yacht! You may return from your adventure with better teeth than when you started.

Western Red Cedar was used by the northwest Indians for cordage, shelter, canoes, hats, clothes, baskets, water containers and mats. The most useful part of the tree is the inner bark – learn how to peel off big sheets of this.

Other "master plants" around the world include date palms, rattan, yucca, pine trees, birch trees and banana trees.

Study the natives' survival and living techniques in your assigned local area carefully, before you go. They have been surviving there for thousands of years, while all you need is a few weeks or months.

Learn from survivalist Dani Beau of "Naked and Afraid," and watch and trail animals to learn from them about local resources like drinking water, food, and shelter and insulation items.

Learn at least six ways of making fire -- practice them regularly. Some of the major ways include: fire saw, fire plow, fire bow drill, fire hand drill, magnifying glass, parabolic reflector, matches, flare, lighter, flint and steel, knife or parang and ferrocium rod, char cloth, steel wool, and battery plus aluminum foil.

As soon as feasible, make some sandals. Very few TV contestants make these, and thus most suffer needlessly. Your feet are very important! For more ideas, see:
<http://wildwoodsurvival.com/survival/clothing/birchbarkshoes.html>

Lure fish by feeding them a few worms each day around dawn and dusk, at exactly the same time and place. After a few days they will become accustomed to this feast. Then it will be your turn.

Cut out a small (one meter wide) hole in the bank beside a river or stream. Leave a narrow entrance. Let the stream water flow in. Fish love holes like this. Wait overnight, then sneak up at dawn and block the entrance. Breakfast is served.

Build a fish weir. These go back 8000 years, and are mentioned in Magna Carta. Such weirs can be huge, but as a survivalist you can start with a small one perhaps 30 feet long. Make it from sticks or stones thrust into the mud or sand, between the low and high tide marks. The weir should be 1-3 feet high, shaped like a longbow, with the curve pointing out to sea, or downstream in a river. Put a one-foot-square hole in the middle, blocked with a fine mesh net or vine fish trap, to catch your prey. This automatic fishing machine will give you protein – crabs, fish, octopi – with every low tide.

Dig for shoreline food. None of the contestants on Alone ever once dug for razor clams, mussels, oysters, sand crabs or geoducks, even though they had huge tidal mudflats right in front of their campsites. Why not? It's a lot easier to catch a defenseless clam that stays in one place, than a fast, ferocious cougar with big claws and a bad temper.

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Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring, and has traveled to 143 of the 196 countries on Earth.

1025 words

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Travel Tales

How to Survive a Survival Show: Traps, Water and Bugs

Part 4

by

Lew Toulmin

OK, you're going to be on a TV survival show, and you need some good advice on what to do. Here goes.

Set lots and lots of traps on land. Most so-called expert contestants on shows like Naked and Afraid (NAA), The Island, or Alone set no traps, or at most one or two. That is crazy. Only about 5-10 percent of your traps will work each day, so you need at least 20 and preferably 40 to ensure a steady supply of porcupines, raccoons, squirrels, chipmunks, mice or rats. Yum! Set small game traps like the figure-4 Paiute deadfall traps, Ojibway bird snares, or bamboo rat traps, and some larger traps like the CommonSenseOutdoors "large game kill trap" on Youtube.

Not keen on eating rats? Don't be so squeamish! They were called "mullers" and considered a delicacy by hungry young midshipmen in Admiral Nelson's day.

Even though few of your traps will work each day, trapping is still much more efficient than hunting. My father, a good woodsman, bow-hunted for deer for 22 seasons and never killed one. Chances are, you won't either. One idiotic "expert" on NAA made a bow and stomped around in the heat of the day, proclaiming he was the local "top predator." Top candidate for heat stroke, more likely.

Shelter for you. A good shelter is key to survival. Yet most TV contestants build truly crummy shelters, and some "experts," like the "six-pack" on NAA XL, built none. Lazy buggers. Your shelter should have a floor that is at least a meter above ground; a steep, monsoon-proof roof; walls with no holes, to keep out bugs; and a comfortable sleeping surface. For ideas, see

www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhCsHIDXaTA. Build your shelter up above the highest possible flood line, and at least 400 feet from a river or bamboo grove, to reduce mosquitos. Avoid poisonous trees and plants; ant, bee and wasp nests; beaches filled with sand fleas, and overhead “widow-maker” branches or trees. During the Malay Emergency (1948-60), the elite British SAS feared deadly falling jungle trees and branches more than the Communist terrorists they were fighting.

Shelter for your fire and firewood. Face it: it’s gonna rain. Probably buckets. Your fire will go out, unless you shelter it, your firewood, and especially your tinder. Yet almost none of the contestants on TV think of this. Duh.

Get drinkable water. Dig a hole behind beach sand dunes, into the “lens” of fresh water that floats above the heavier salt water driven in by the ocean. But only expose 2-3 inches of fresh water; below that it may be brackish or salt. On rivers, find a very small tributary, and go upstream to a spring. Ram a length of bamboo into the soil of the spring and harvest the clean water. Line your shelter with bamboo gutters to catch pure rainwater. Cut several dozen joints of bamboo with open tops, and stand them together on end in a big square. Direct your gutters to top them off.

Boil questionable water. But recognize that boiling water every day will take enormous time and energy, to gather the wood, build the fire, boil the water, wait for it to cool, and drink it. And even then you will get about a quart -- you need gallons. So develop other, more productive methods as fast as possible. You can get weak or even heat stroke from lack of water in a hot climate in just half a day.

If you are stuck in a bad situation with only a muddy, filthy watering hole full of animal poo, as happened to some contestants on NAA, do the following: dig a small hole near the waterhole, and let water filter in through the soil. Cover your container with a kerchief, moss or your hand and dip it in the small hole, only allowing in water from below the surface, to avoid any floating nasties. Filter the water through a four stage system, with sand, green leaves, ground charcoal from your fire, and more sand, with each layer separated by a leaf or matrix. Then bring the water to a rolling boil.

The Alone contestants were stuck in an area with dangerous predators such as cougars and bears, but did nothing except cower in their tents with their fires lit. Duh. You can set large traps for the predators (think what 600 pounds of meat would do for your meager diet!); build a circular “boma” of thorn bushes like East Africans do to protect against lions; put out punji stakes; or build a “cheval de frise” like combatants in the Middle Ages. This is a log with sharpened stakes projecting from it, which can stop charging cavalry – or bears – in their tracks.

Repel or divert insects. There are scores of good traditional methods for doing this; Google Erik Kiviat's article "Traditional Protection Against Biting Flies" for a comprehensive list. For example: fly white flags or hang marigolds around your camp. Eat wild leaks. Wear bright fluorescent orange clothes. Mosquitos prefer pigs -- so sleep with a pig! (Hey, I couldn't make this stuff up.)

Or, build small smoky fires using coconut husks or punk wood (rotten, dry wood) upwind of your camp. My great-g-g-grandfather Reuben Duggar, a doctor in the Confederate Army, ordered this done for his troops, and it kept malaria down to a minimum. He almost figured out the exact relationship between malaria and mosquitos in 1863, but unfortunately that discovery had to wait until 1900.

OR, learn to eat the local bugs before they eat you! Insects are considered a delicacy in many countries -- go for the big crunchy ones like giant grasshoppers.

Learn the local plants and vegetables. TV contestants are always whining for protein, but a few trained and talented vegetarians like Dani Beau of NAA have survived for 21 and even 40 days in primitive conditions on only plants.

OK, you're ready for your big adventure. Don't worry! I will be right behind you, rooting for you, on my TV couch. Remember, I want my 20 percent agent's fee for keeping you alive. So go get 'em, tiger! (Honey, pass the Twinkies, please.)

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Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring with his "honey" -- wife Susan.

1040 words

#end of Survival TV series#