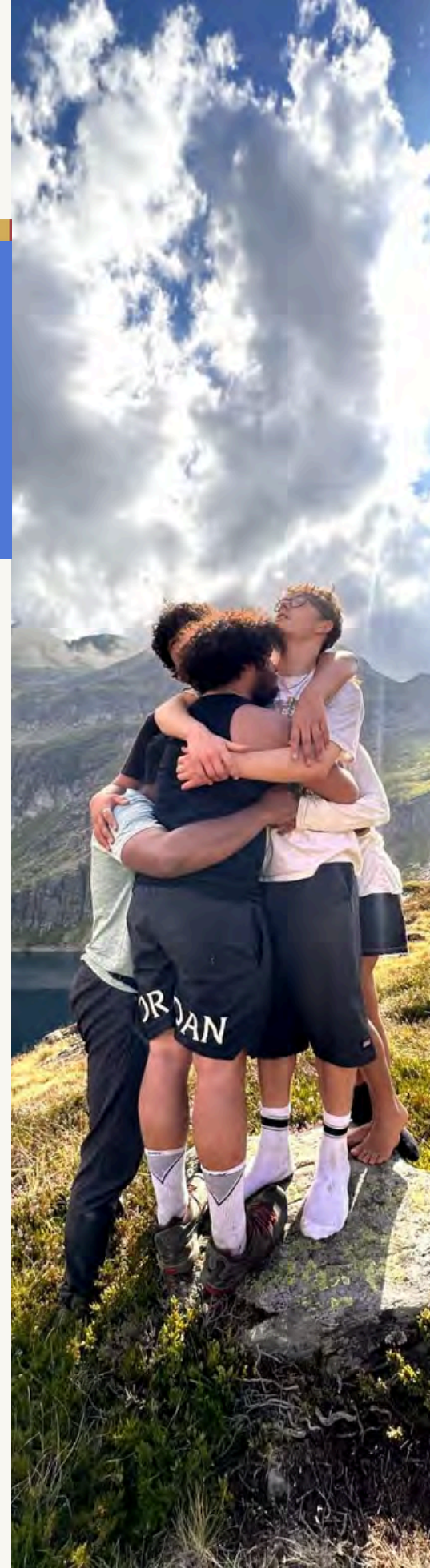


## SEEING THE STARS FOR THE FIRST TIME: SUSHEEL BALASU'S EXPERIENCE OF THE HUMAN FORCE CAMP AT AMARANTHE

It's a little hard to know where to begin when I write about my experiences as a participant in the Amaranthe Human Force camp; there's so much I'd like to cover.

To give a little background about the Amaranthe project: the goal was to create an eco-village, a tight-knit community living in harmony with the purpose of achieving greater socio-cultural and ecological sustainability. And everything was done keeping this in mind. The homes were designed to be more ecologically friendly and energy-efficient. There were green spaces throughout the village, cultivated according to permaculture principles. The toilets were rainwater and compost sawdust toilets, and there was a dedicated area for composting. Even our shower water was treated and returned to the environment, so we made use of eco-friendly products free from harmful chemicals. We'd immerse ourselves in this sustainable lifestyle for the fifteen-day camp.



This was a camping-only program, and we camped in a grassy patch in the village. We'd typically start the day with breakfast together, separate into groups for the activities of the day, and meet back around noon for lunch. The food was always so good that I found myself wanting to learn to cook this way, so I'd leave activities a bit early to help with the preparation. I'm really not great in the kitchen, but the organisers were always very nice and patient with me. The evenings were usually free time that we'd spend relaxing, finishing chores, or freshening up for dinner. After dinner, we usually played a high-paced card game we invented called "Mollusc." Some nights, we'd just lay on the grass and gaze at the stars, feeling the cool air around us and waiting for a shooting star to fly by. I live in the city, and I haven't seen more than a few stars at once. It was amazing to see what the night sky really looked like.

We'd spend time gathering in a circle each day to explore ideas central to the camp's theme and share our personal experiences. On the first day, for example, we explored the theme of living a beautiful life and what that meant to each of us. The idea was that as the camp progressed, we would try to connect these aspects with what we were experiencing in the camp and how we could integrate this into our lives afterward. These discussions were always incredibly engaging; there's something special when you're exploring topics meaningful to you around people who genuinely care and listen.

## **Learning how to build an Eco-friendly home**

We spent a whole afternoon with the residents of Amaranthe, learning how to build eco-friendly homes. We delved into many topics, from how to position your home, sustainable toilet options, foundations (typically they used rock, then a smaller lime-concrete layer that allows the floor to "breathe"), the types of framing (typically they used wood), and the walls were made mostly of straw-bales (these were favored because of the minimal environmental impact, high insulation, and the resulting energy efficiency) and much more.

We were able to put what we learned into practice in our tasks: We spent an afternoon plastering the walls of one of the houses with mud, which included preparing the mud plaster mix, applying the mix on the straw walls, and carefully smoothing it to create a seamless finish.

What ended up becoming our big project for the camp was the garden shed we built from the ground up. We began with leveling the ground and then laid a foundation of stone, sand, and concrete blocks. We then stacked the bales like bricks and threaded adjacent bales together with twine using a "bamboo needle." Large bamboo sticks gave structure to our straw walls, and the sword-fights we had with them were an integral part of any bamboo construction. The roof was a wooden frame with chicken wire and mesh, which we eventually lifted onto the shed with a crane at the end. Once this was done, the entire shed had to be plastered with mud. We finished by the last day and had a special ceremony to celebrate what we'd finished in the camp. We gathered by the shed, each of us holding thoughts of what we hoped our work would signify, and we poured our wishes into a bowl of water and threw it on the shed. It felt like we were imparting it with our hopes and efforts, something that marked the end of our amazing journey together.

Photo credit: Amaranthe Camping Area, Human Force, 2023



A photograph of four young adults (three women and one man) standing together in a lush, green mountain valley. They are dressed in hiking attire. In the background, a steep, rocky mountain slope rises, with a few other hikers visible in the distance. The scene is bathed in bright, natural light.

**"There's something special when you're exploring topics meaningful to you around people who genuinely care and listen."**

Photo credit: Amaranthe Camp, Human Force, 2023

## Hiking in the French Countryside

The camp included a 3-day trek in the Pyrénées mountains led by our expert high mountain guide, Olivier. We spent some time a few days before the hike going through everything we'd need. The idea was to carry the bare essentials so we'd move with as little weight as possible. We left early to avoid hiking in the heat. This was my first hike, and I always thought a hike was just a nice long walk. What I realised as we walked along was that it's much more like climbing an infinite set of stairs. My legs started to cramp a few hours in, but I was lent an extra pair of hiking poles, which helped enormously. I took a little load off my legs and put it in my arms so they didn't cramp as much. Olivier also slowed his pace, and I walked right behind him. He'd walk the path, taking steps with the slightest incline and distance, and I'd follow.

We also learned a lot about hiking, like how keeping a constant pace without stopping - rather than shorter bursts of speed and rest - was much better. How important breathing is to keep moving. To follow the trail, as deviating from it could inadvertently create new paths, especially when it rained. To "leave no trace" to minimize our impact on the environment.



It's hard to describe how beautiful everything around was, I'll leave that to the pictures.

On the first day, we pitched our tents in a valley where friendly cows and horses grazed, who occasionally nibbled at our backpacks. The food was surprisingly great; during the whole hike, we basically feasted on multiple courses each meal. We had pasta, rice, smoked salmon, cheese (so much cheese), and more, which we cooked with the portable stoves we carried. It's still hard to imagine we carried all that food up there. On the second day, we reached a reservoir not far from the peak. The view and the swims were truly beautiful.

On the third day, we started early while it was still dark to reach the peak, so we didn't have to deal with the sun and additional hikers that might make it harder. It started to get much steeper as we headed up, but we reached the peak around mid-morning. After celebratory hugs, pictures, and snacks, some of us meditated. I just tried to burn the view to my memory the best I could. We then headed to camp, packed, and went for another swim in the reservoir before heading back down.



Photo credits: Amaranthe Camp, Human Force, 2023



## Nature connection sessions

These sessions were meant to explore our inner connection to the wild with sensory practices and games. Our guide explained how getting very in tune with the nature around us was possible. For example, it was possible to interpret the sounds of the birds to know if there were animals nearby, how to be still and blend into nature enough to pet a wild deer.

We played games to practice. Some games would deprive us of one of the senses (usually our sight), so you'd have to compensate with the others, and these were really fun.

My personal favorite was a game where the focus was on blending in with our surroundings. One of us, "the owl," would sit watchfully with everyone else spread around and hiding at least a minimum distance away. The goal was simple - touch the owl without being spotted. If the owl spots you and calls your name and where you're hiding, you're out. The owl will periodically "fall asleep" and count down loudly from 10, and immediately everyone rushes towards him. Once the count is done, the owl is "awake," and anyone he spots is out.



We'd hide up in trees, crouch behind bushes, lay flat on the ground, and rush hard as soon as the count started. Things got intense! We learned from our guide that the trick to this was that it was much more important to remain completely still than be camouflaged well but moving around because the eyes are much more drawn to movement. This game was more than just a test of stealth; it taught us the art of observation and the value of patience, revealing how even the slightest stir can ripple through the calm of nature.

We explored caves that were a short drive away, then swam and played around in the gentle currents of a stream close by. It was freezing cold at first but incredible once I got used to it. We spent an evening attending a jazz festival in Carla-Bayle, the "Art Village of Ariège," a commune known for being a vibrant artistic hub. We enjoyed pizza at the Sunday market, which had a very Bohemian/Hippie atmosphere to it. We had supper with a giant traditional dish at the local Montbrun-Bocage festival of Saint Roch. A marching band played as we ate, and whenever they played a song we liked (which was often), we'd all stand on the benches to clap and dance along. There was a workshop on the art of transferring dyes from flowers and leaves onto fabric by simply hammering them onto the surface. We even got to try it on our own piece of clothing and take our handcrafted souvenirs home.

We had a bonfire night, where we toasted Bananas and Chocolate in aluminum foil and let them melt together into a delicious snack. There was a drum circle; we gathered in a circle with buckets, pots, and anything else that could be a drum. It was surprising how little it took to get a great beat going. We also offered to teach each other our passions and interests, from yoga to poi, juggling, wood carving, striking, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, and even math.

## **Reconsidering what I want my life to look like**

I grew up in a Subud family, and when I was younger, I remember other Subud members used to stay at our home all the time, and I can easily see why; the people I met at the camp were easily some of the kindest and most friendly I've ever met. We did our activities, ate, handled chores, and went out of our way to take care of each other. It really felt like we were one big family, not just strangers in a camp. As camp ended, I offered everyone a standing invitation to visit if they ever found themselves in my area (and if I missed anyone, please know you're definitely invited!).

I've never done a camp like this, so this really meant a lot to me. There was a moment where I was in a stream, with the chill of the cold water flowing over me. All I did was try as hard as I could to remember that moment exactly how it was. And this was something I found myself doing consistently throughout the camp. The real hard part for me was getting the camp to last. I'd be back to work behind a desk and a computer soon enough, and time seemed to fly by at triple the speed. The camp made me reconsider what I would want my future to look like. A life like this, living this close to nature, with close friends and family right next to you, having meals together at a large open table, certainly seems like a beautiful one to me. I'm glad I could attend the Human Force camp, and I've really enjoyed my time at Amaranthe.