

Dear Reader,

We do not all have an inheritance, a rich lover or patron (or even savings), yet I found I do not need these to split my time between two homes. When I left what others call my 'proper job' for the clearly improper life of an itinerant writer-adventurer, I decided to find a space, a place to call my own (yet it is NOT mine; being hidden away on someone else's land – everything is owned by THEM).

That summer I left the train in what was officially the Middle of Nowhere (a request stop).<sup>1</sup> Alone in the woods and hills. Alone? No – for I was surrounded by the wild things. I saw other humans on but two occasions (when I was not resupplying).

I built a house. Although to call it a house may be a misnomer. It was a shelter, a shanty, a Thoreauvian shack. Wood and heather, bracken and stone and roll upon roll of emerald and earthy living moss to cover it all.<sup>2</sup> I found the skull of a red deer and it became One Skull Shack. I stayed until the fall (do you prefer fall or autumn – I am English born and Scottish raised, yet I love the simple statement of the former. It fits.) had passed and Christmas was close, by which time it was Five Skull Shack. I have been back since and will again, soon.<sup>3</sup>

I am more whole when I split my time between these two places, betwixt civilisation and a wilder state. One balances the other perfectly. It is not self which is divided, but simply location; locations can, and should, change. One sharpens the other – when I can no longer smell traffic fumes I find describing them becomes simpler, more fluid, memory sharpening pencil. When I no longer have to pick ticks from my clothes before they latch on and feast, or collect my firewood and water, I find I can concentrate on what I gained from such experience, distil it into my worth. It is not wild versus civilisation, pen and ink against keyboard and computer, letter vs email, analogue v. digital – rather, these pairs form partnerships. By understanding the strengths and weaknesses of both I find my work and I am less of a dichotomy and more of a complete article. I find writing by hand in a notebook (or dry leaf), near a fire, and with my favourite – if temperamental – fountain pen (THIS pen – I have used her for nearly thirty years [and take great care her ink does not freeze]) is perfect for planning, for drafts and sketches of character and place and plot. These take on a different, smokier flavour. In civilisation I have my PC and I can type four times faster than I write by hand. This is the place for full copy, for edits.

In answer to your query, when I am in the wild I certainly use Poste Restante, principally for items I cannot purchase locally; a new bow saw blade, a star map, many batteries, pipe cleaners, all procured and posted with a letter by my sister. I carry my passport as ID, although the assistant has to peer beneath fresh beard and mad mountain-man stare in order to ascertain whether I truly exist. It can be difficult making small-talk, when the last thing you spoke to were the tracks of a Scottish wild cat. Similarly, when I return to the world of duvet and shower, there can be a process of readjustment. Fascinating in itself. When I am out in the wild I have time to think. Time is different out there; deadlines and hours mean little, beyond the constant search for food, water, and fuel. Here, however, the day is passing and I live by the schedules of others – and the post will soon be collected. Time to catch it, and dinner.

Until the next time,  
Alex. <sup>4</sup>

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In answer to your query, when I am in the wild I certainly use Poste Restante (after a long hike and a train ride to the nearest post office - a day's adventure I combine with resupply), principally for items I cannot purchase locally (a new bow saw blade, a star map, many batteries, pipe cleaners, all procured and posted with a letter by my sister). I carry my passport as ID, although the assistant has to peer beneath fresh beard and mad mountain man stare in order to ascertain whether I truly exist. It can be difficult making small-talk, when the last thing you spoke to were the tracks of a Scottish wild cat. Similarly, when I return to the

<sup>1</sup> The station in question is Lochailort, on the line called Rathad Iarainn nan Eilean in Gaelic — the Iron Road to the Isles. Lochailort is the next station after Glenfinnan Viaduct, known from the Harry Potter films.

<sup>2</sup> An illustrated design guide to the self-built vernacular shelter was included with Alexander's letter, inked on to an oak leaf, and is pictured here.

<sup>3</sup> We have pushed Alexander for the location of his shack, and he has been understandably coy. This is the closest he has come to telling us: 'My wilderness home, originally One Skull Shack, now Seven Skull Shack, is in a small wooded glen, nestling between the hills and not too far from the coastline. It would be very difficult to find, even with GPS or O/S grid references, it is so well hidden. As far as I am aware no-one has yet found it. It sits snugly in the middle of the area called the Rough Bounds of Lochaber (Garbh-Chriochan Loch Abar), a name which truly fits.'

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Crow is a freelance writer and web designer, and is currently working on his first three novels. He divides his time between Wick, in northern Scotland, and Seven Skull Shack, in the Rough Bounds of Lochaber.

